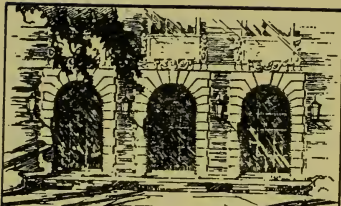


THE  
SHADOW OF A LIFE



By  
BERYL HOPE

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THE  
SHADOW OF A LIFE:

A Girl's Story.

BY

B E R Y L   H O P E .

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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VOL. I.

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THE  
SHADOW OF A LIFE.

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CHAPTER I.

THE OLD HOME.

“Be it ever so humble, there ’s no place like home.”

I CAN see it now, the dear old house in which I was born. It is gone—like so many relics of the past which are doubly treasured because they no longer exist—burnt down and destroyed by a large fire which devastated half the street, and in its place now stands a row of shops. But still the remembrance of it remains, the outline is familiar to my sight, and every room is clearly stamped upon my memory.

It was no gorgeous pile, no castellated edifice; no elaborate carving decorated its walls, or marked it from the buildings which surrounded it. It was a simple square-built house, in red brick, fronting upon the principal street of the town of Halton:—an unpretentious, ugly building enough, with stuccoed pillars on each side of the hall-door which in our childhood we liked to imagine were granite, and with the usual five windows above and four below with which such houses are commonly ornamented. A house once despised, but now doubly dear, inasmuch as it contains all the memories of my childhood. There I was born, and lived, and grew up, and there my mother died, this sad circumstance changing the current of our lives:—but I must not anticipate.

The town of Halton was an old straggling market-town dating back, so far as I can tell, to about the fifteenth century, and neither prospering very rapidly, nor falling off in its

steady-going trade. Houses had been built up, pulled down, or repaired, without any reference to their predecessors, and the streets had that irregular aspect which is so rare in these days of modern architecture, in which the first aim seems to be neatness and uniformity. Built in every style of architecture, from the gabled roof and dark lines of the Elizabethan period, down to the stiff, square, tea-caddy shaped building of more recent growth, there was a picturesque, quaint look about the old town which gave it almost a foreign appearance. But it was ill-paved and ill-lighted, and contrasted unfavourably with the neighbouring assize town of Wentworth, which, possessing the attraction of a regiment, was considered an authority in all details of fashionable intelligence, even though it was looked upon as a rival. Up till within a few years Halton had not boasted of a railway, and there were several among its more ancient inhabitants who looked upon such an advance in civilisation as a use-

less and troublesome innovation likely to cause more harm than good, and bring evils into the place which till then had been unthought of. I believe some of these worthy old people would have been content with their sedan chairs and pattens till the end of the nineteenth century, and certainly preferred the habits of their youth to the more intelligent manners and customs of modern society, which they appeared to resent as a sort of infringement upon their social rights. But they were for the most part worthy people, who gossiped harmlessly about their neighbours, and whose smallest actions were a matter of interest to one another. With them, however, we had little in common. We could not claim relationship with a single family in the place—nor, indeed, anywhere else for the matter of that—but we knew them all in a semi-sociable way, sufficient to warrant a kind smile or word of greeting as we met. Beyond that, our acquaintance was slight. My father did not

desire that his children should acquire the same habits of indolent curiosity which our neighbours possessed, and which he condemned, not only as a waste of time, but as likely to form impressions which it would be difficult to eradicate in later years. To give us a good education was his chief object, to keep us as far as possible from lowering influences, and to elevate our minds so that we might appreciate for ourselves the many advantages which were to be found above and beyond the little world in which we dwelt. In this he showed wisdom, as I now see, though in the days which are gone I have too often chafed at my want of companionship, and blamed my parents for unkindness in permitting it.

Perhaps this fact was well understood in Halton : at any rate, it was acknowledged. Very few among the respectable and respected town-folk ventured to intrude themselves into the sanctity of our home circle. Towards my father they showed a profound reverence ; to

my mother they extended a kindly nod of recognition. Though most of them lived in better houses than we could boast, there seemed an insurmountable barrier between us, and the sociability of Halton, of which there was a good deal, was carried on without any reference to ourselves. My mother never complained; perhaps she, like my father, desired that it should be so, and, with only one exception, I do not think that she had an intimate friend in the town.

He, dear soul, was far too much occupied to take note of such small matters as our childish discontent, and I think my mother's ear was the only recipient of my occasional burst of injured feeling. My father was the doctor of Halton; a busy, active, care-worn man so far back as I can carry my memory, with sorrow and anxiety visibly written upon his face—a handsome face still, a face at which one might look twice with the conviction that it was an index to a noble and great mind, albeit that mind had

known sorrow and suffering. Perhaps the many scenes through which he had passed in his medical career had caused those lines which lay round the flexible mouth ; perhaps some sorrow had touched with her ruthless hand a corner of that sensitive heart, sending a thrill of agony to every part of the delicately organised frame, the impress of which would for ever remain, despite the happiness which had since endeavoured to atone for it. But there it was, unheeded, unnoticed by us, till long after I had passed the age of childhood. It had always been so. We could rarely recall a burst of hearty laughter, a lively joke, a romp with us children such as those in which most fathers indulge. The nearest approach to anything like levity was an occasional ripple of low laughter which would unconsciously escape his lips over a book which he was reading, and which would cause us to exchange glances of surprised interest that our father had found something to amuse him.

From this it must not be imagined that he

was a morose or cold-hearted man. No father loved his children with a truer devotion than he bestowed upon us, though we met but seldom, and then said so little to each other. Though he was reserved, he was never cold; though quiet, rarely angry or irritable. We only understood that he was busy, a feeling that was so general throughout the household that our usual occupations were followed without reference to him. His chief interest appeared to be in his practice, and a doctor who is devoted to his patients has not much time for his own home circle. We were left almost entirely to the care of our mother, or to the governess whom he himself had taken pains to select as our teacher. In this manner I grew up, with a deep and reverent love for my father, but with a love which contained more of respect than confidence. To my mother were imparted my childish griefs, my pleasures, my victories or defeats. I believed that she understood far better than he the workings of my



inner nature, the pride and temper which were my chief stumbling-blocks. But from her lips fell more words of condemnation and reproof than I altogether appreciated, and I frequently contrasted her unfavourably with my other parent who was to me the perfection of manhood.

She was what would have been termed in characteristic vernacular as a "natty" person, clear-headed, far-seeing, and energetic; she could "turn her hand" to whatever came in her way, making sure that the result would be satisfactory, as it always was. I never saw anyone with so great a love for order and neatness. It was quite distressing to her to see a book out of place, an untidy work-basket, or a soiled collar. The only time that I can remember her boxing my ears was when I went out with three buttons off my boots, upon which occasion I had met old Lady Milford from the Park, who had graciously stopped and spoken to me. I remembered the circumstance for

a long time afterwards, illogically connecting the unoffending old lady with the action—which, doubtless, was the most correct construction I could put upon it—and feeling conscious and unhappy whenever I saw her carriage in the distance. But my mother was not impatient as a rule; she, like my father, had seen sorrow, and was reserved even to mystery upon certain subjects. We knew that there had been a little child born to them before any of us were born, whose brief existence might partly account for the cloud which hung over them; but when I had once ventured to ask her some particulars, she closed the subject instantly, with a request that I might never name it more, or certainly not in the presence of my father.

Fortunately for us, the sadness which appeared to be part of our parents' nature was not extended to us, their children; we were all in our different ways inclined to be merry and light-hearted, as healthy happy children

upon whom earth's shadows have not yet fallen are wont to be. Edmund, our eldest and only brother, was, perhaps, the staidest of the party, but he was not much with us except in the holidays. Agnes, a year younger than myself, was also dignified and sensible—much more so than I, who was always wayward and impulsive—but she had her merry moods occasionally ; while our little sister Mildred, some five years younger, enlivened the household with her childish prattle, and unvarying good temper.

So long as I was a child I believe I was tolerably contented with the circumstances which surrounded my life. It was when I had attained the age of fourteen or thereabouts that I began to feel higher aspirations. I chafed at our position in the town, secretly believing that we were rather better than other people, which was the cause of their keeping so aloof from our society, and yet annoyed that they should adopt this line towards us. I did not venture to remark upon this in my mother's

presence, feeling sure that it would call forth a strong reproof, for she had a great objection to anything like pride and vanity, of which, alas! I had so much. Our only companions at this time were the children of an ironmonger who lived a few doors from our house, over their shop in the High Street. We were often surprised that we were allowed to speak to them at all, but the intimacy appeared to have grown up unconsciously, and I had no recollection of how or when it had begun. Mr. Thorburn, the father, was a big man with a loud, fussy manner; his wife a gentle little body who was invariably kind to us. The children—three girls and a boy, like ourselves, though differing in age—had been playmates for so long that their want of refinement did not grate upon us till now, when my mind was beginning to develop, and I could judge of such matters for myself. Besides, I could see that our intimacy was distasteful to my father, and though I grumbled because I had no other friends, I

secretly despised these humble companions. Why, I thought, if my father visited among the "county-people," as we townfolk designated them, should not we also do the same? I knew that he was regarded by many of them as a friend, and I had myself come in for many a kind word or admiring glance when I had had the good fortune to be with him in their presence. But they never called upon us, though their carriages frequently stood before the door, waiting to receive the answer to a missive of delicate importance brought by the servants. We knew most of the big houses by sight, and used to point them out to one another as the places where our father went, conjecturing what might be inside or how we should behave if we were invited to spend a day there, a problem which seemed never destined to have a solution. Even during our few short years of childhood, changes had taken place in these mansions, as changes take place everywhere. The dear old lady who had

kindly stopped and spoken to me when the shabbiness of my boots had been such a sore point in my memory, departed to her rest when I had just completed my twelfth year, and her husband Sir George Milford followed her within six months afterwards. We were sorry for this, *i.e.* sorry for the loss of two kindly faces which had become well-known to all the inhabitants of Halton, and whose good deeds would live after them for some years to come. We were told that the eldest son had now taken possession of the Park, and very soon our thoughts were diverted by the sight of him with his beautiful young wife, appearing in the old family pew in which we had seen them hitherto as guests of the family. But after a time these incidents only served to furnish us with new interests, as our lives flowed on in their even, uneventful stream. It was on my fourteenth birthday that a change in the current of my life seemed to be imminent. I had been unusually troublesome to

my governess Miss Marks, whose patience, I can now see, must have been sorely tried by my vagaries. After indignantly refusing to read history with her, because it was my birthday, I shut the book up flat, and took up my little work-basket which contained a pair of unfinished socks which I was knitting for my brother Edmund.

Miss Marks said nothing. She possibly knew from experience that anything like remonstrance was useless, but she pushed the closed book from before her where I had laid it down, and left the room in silence. My sister Agnes looked at me reproachfully, which only confirmed my determination to appear as indifferent as possible; but unfortunately this was not so easy a matter as I intended that it should be. My breath came quick, my hands were very cold, and my tongue seemed dry and clave to the roof of my mouth. "Where can she have gone?" I soliloquized, as her lengthened absence caused me still further uneasiness.

My father, as I hoped, had gone out some time ago, but my mother would surely have appeared upon the scene before this if it was to her that Miss Marks had made her appeal. I was not long left in doubt, though the minutes appeared to me like hours. In a short time Miss Marks returned with a request that I would follow her to my father's private room, and now, indeed, I did feel frightened, though my pride was equal to almost any emergency. With my knitting in my hand, my head industriously bent over the rapid stitches which my trembling fingers tried to form, I passed by Agnes in silence, unheeding the little twitch which she gave to my dress in token of sympathetic kindness. Down the passage, and out at the side door, across the yard with its plot of green in the middle, till we came to the little building which was fitted up as my father's surgery, and to which many of the patients made their approach by the side gate which led into the lane. Miss Marks pushed open the door in



answer to a summons from within, and then, with more discretion than I should probably have credited her with, modestly retired.

My father was seated in his arm-chair by the table which was thickly strewn with books and medical documents. He appeared to be writing a letter, though possibly it might have been a prescription only. When he did raise his head, I saw, instead of the dreaded frown and grave expression of his usually sad face, a light as it were breaking over his whole countenance; and taking this as a hopeful sign that the forthcoming lecture would not be very formidable, I took courage and ventured to address him first :

“ Did you wish to speak to me, Father ? ”

My hands were still twitching nervously in their futile attempts to pick up dropped stitches which had maliciously slipped from their proper position during my hurried march across the grass plot, but my face had the

semblance of a smile on it, reflected, no doubt, by the brightness from my father's own.

“Yes, Ella, I do,” he replied in a grave voice which sounded rather at variance with his more encouraging expression. “I am sorry to hear that it is necessary. Miss Marks tells me that you have been both rude and disobedient to her; is this the case?”

He looked at me calmly while waiting for my reply, in which my natural truthfulness and my intense pride were having a severe tussle for the upper hand. I could not say that I had not been rude, so took refuge in excuse by way of helping myself out of the difficulty.

“Miss Marks is aggravating,” I said, pouting, “and she does not understand me. I think it is very hard that I should be kept at lessons on my birthday now that I am fourteen. Surely a few hours in the morning of one day cannot be of much consequence to my education.”

The smile which curved round my father's mouth seemed to assume a curious mixture of satire and playfulness as he said :

“Of course Miss Marks' object in teaching you at all is simply to cause you annoyance. It must be so interesting to her to watch the effect of her efforts in that direction. Is this what you wish to imply ? ”

“No,” I said sullenly, “of course not.”

“But you think you know much better than she does the proper amount of study which is necessary for you. I am afraid your fourteen years have not taught you much common sense, my child, but, so far as I can see, have developed a great deal of pride and wilfulness. Your conduct towards Miss Marks is such as any girl of fourteen should be ashamed of, both impertinent and intolerable, and I cannot allow it to continue.” My father's words contained no undercurrent of irritability, though they were severe, and I felt them. My eyes were cast upon the table now, and I did not dare to

raise them, or suffer myself to reply. A choking sensation was burning in my throat, and I clenched my hands very tight to prevent the scalding tears from forcing their way into my eyes, as they seemed determined to do.

“ You used to profess an affection for your governess,” he went on, “ at which I own that I felt much pleasure, for I understand her worth, perhaps, even better than you do. You owe much to her, not only in education, and I am surprised that you cannot value her services more.”

All this was true, and I felt it. Miss Marks had been our constant companion since I had passed out of the hands of Mrs. Mason, our old Scotch nurse. But for her, our lives would have been much more monotonous than we had hitherto found them. But I had grown tired of her, and her authority had waxed feeble ; with the oncoming years my own will was developing, and now came into constant conflict with her superior judgment, thus

causing many quarrels of which I had supposed my father to be in ignorance. His words, however, proved that he knew more about me than I fancied, and I was a little startled at the discovery. Perhaps Miss Marks had been in the habit of complaining to him unknown to myself: if so, she had been ungenerous, taking a mean advantage of me, who would not have thus acted towards herself. My first impulse was to feel softened, but as this bitter thought crossed my mind, my resentment against her redoubled its force.

“I do not care for Miss Marks,” I answered, my pride enabling me to gulp down the stinging lump which was burning in my throat. “I think she is very unkind sometimes, and I wish she was not my teacher.”

“I do not intend that she shall be much longer,” said my father in his calm clear voice. “I have seen for some time that you do not appreciate her as you ought to do, and have

therefore made arrangements for you to leave home, and go to school, where I hope you will be under more control, and learn to govern your own nature better.”

The words fell upon me so suddenly that I had hardly time to note the importance of them. I had not dreamed of going to school, of leaving my own home and its inmates from whom I had never been parted in my life. A quick sensation thrilled through me which was almost indefinable, a sense of something new and strange, but very important—an event, an epoch which would, perhaps, be one of my turning-points in life—to which I should look backwards in the after years as a division of that which came before from that which would be hereafter. The lump was growing bigger again, and the suddenness of my father’s words had unnerved me and thrown me off my guard. The two large tears which lay so near my eyes welled over and fell upon my hands with a little splash, and were followed by others in

quick succession which I had no power to control as I longed to do.

My father spoke kindly after this. He took me into his arms and kissed me, pointing out the many advantages that were to be gained by this step, and assuring me that it was no sudden resolve, although it might appear so to me. And all the while there was the strange light in his eyes which had surprised me at first, and which seemed to shine forth from behind the cloud which usually shaded his face, not wholly dispersing it, but only as it were in gleams of fitful sunshine casting rays of brightness through the shadow. After a little conversation, I found myself talking more freely with him than I had ever done before, and, the ice thus broken, I told him of some of my discontentment and longing for companions. He did not blame me as I expected, but seemed to appreciate my feelings, though he regretted them. He was glad that I should now have the opportunity of knowing other people, he

said, and in a short time he hoped to send Agnes to the same school, so that we should not be long parted from each other. Before I left him I felt quite happy and elated with the new prospect before me; and when a message arrived to say that his horse and gig were waiting at the door, I jumped up with alacrity, eager to assist him with his preparations.

“Can I post these letters for you?” I asked, anxious to show him how useful I now intended to be for the short time in which I should be at home. “This one is not yet directed,” and I indicated the one which he had been writing when I had been brought up for judgment.

“No,” he answered “it is not for post. I am driving out in that direction, and will take it myself,” and he rapidly ran over the address with his pen, which I as rapidly perused after him. It was to Lady Constance Milford, the wife of the newly-made baronet, whose face had caused



me so much interest. "Do you know her?" I eagerly inquired; "and is she as nice as she is pretty?"

But to the latter part of this sentence my father turned a deaf ear. "Yes, I know her," he answered quickly; "don't you know that I have always attended the family? Now go, my child. Don't forget the other letters, and—Ella—"

"Yes, Father."

"Don't forget to apologise to Miss Marks for your rudeness."

My face became rather rosy at this reminder. With a hurried "Yes," I snatched up my knitting, sprang out at the door, and was across the yard and back into the schoolroom before he could have drawn on his gloves. Running up to Miss Marks, I said, rather flippantly:

"Miss Marks, I'm really very sorry if I was rude to you; but all the same, we won't have any history to-day, thank you. And, Agnes, when you have time I want you up in my room. I have something of importance to communicate."

Agnes looked surprised. She had evidently expected to see me enter with a crestfallen countenance, and was not quite prepared for the lively manner which I had adopted; but without vouchsafing another remark, I was off and upstairs, looking into the nursery on my way to my own room, to see if perchance my mother might be within. My conjecture proved correct. There she was, in deep consultation with Mrs. Mason over the letting-down of summer frocks, and such like important matters. They were both too much absorbed to take any notice of me till I surprised my mother with a hug, an action of so rare an occurrence that she looked up startled.

“Well, Ella, what is it?” she asked as soon as she could recover her breath; “some favour you wish to ask, I’ll be bound. To be let off lessons, I should not wonder: is that it?”

“No, Mother, thank you, for I told Miss Marks that I did not wish to have any more to-day myself. That isn’t it at all. Some more,

far more important news for you to hear—though, perhaps, it is not news to you at all.”

My mother smiled significantly. “What can it be?” she asked in the puzzled tone which people adopt when trying to throw a child off the scent, but which was too transparent a counterfeit to escape my notice.

“Then you do know,” I said reproachfully, “and I thought I should have given you such a surprise. I think you might have told me,” I added in an injured tone; “you might have known how much I should like to have heard it.”

“If you mean about your going to school, Ella, I certainly could not have told you, for your father only named it to me a few days ago; and then only upon condition that I should not speak of it before you children.”

“Mason knew, I suppose,” I said, glancing towards our old nurse who, like my mother, was busy in her operations over the gathers of the aforesaid frocks.

“Yes, Miss Ella,” she said demurely, “I knew all about it, but only yesterday. It’s that that makes us so busy the day.”

So this important secret was no secret at all, and my ardour in imparting it was somewhat damped; but it soon revived when my mother began talking of our preparations. Then I entered warmly into the subject, inquiring first how soon I was to leave home, where I was to go, what sort of school it was to be, and so on. My mother was kind, as she always was. She dwelt particularly upon my great advantages in being removed from the narrow world in which I lived, and urged me to make the most of such great opportunities, which I was not slow in promising. The emancipation from my present life was too charming to be under-rated. I already pictured myself as the admired and beloved of all my school friends, being not insensible to the graces which nature had bestowed upon me. In short, no pillar was wanting to support the fairy castle

which my excited imagination had built. Before the great day arrived upon which I was to start in my first voyage of life, the bright clouds of anticipation had floated into the horizon and tinted the future with a golden hue.

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## CHAPTER II.

## A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

“There’s a lady—an earl’s daughter; she is proud and she is noble,  
And she treads the crimson carpets, and she breathes  
the perfumed air.”

*Mrs. Browning.*

THE school to which Agnes and I were sent, was a fashionable boarding-school at the west end of London, where, according to my anticipations, I was thoroughly happy for the space of four years. When I returned home I was eighteen, and quite a grown-up young lady according to my own ideas of that phrase. I

had made many friends during my sojourn, was sufficiently popular to have at least half a dozen confidantes, and, when the time came for me to depart, was genuinely sorry to say good-bye to so many who had been kind to me. I had visited at several houses during the holidays, and had made acquaintance with the relatives of some of my schoolfellows, many of whom occupied a position in life which was rather above my own. But I had never ventured to ask my parents whether they would return the kind hospitality which I had received, feeling an intuitive certainty that my request would not be complied with. And, indeed, I had no desire to do so, for I was already beginning to feel ashamed of our quiet home and plain manner of living, and usually rejoiced when the holidays came to an end and I could return to the bright companionship of my friends. When the time came for me to leave school altogether, I looked forward with more dread than pleasure to the life that might

be in store for me. I could anticipate nothing in the way of gaiety such as most girls indulge in, for I had never remembered my father and mother going to a ball in their lives, and though I had been taught dancing, felt morally certain that my powers would not often be called into action. Besides, there was no one whom I could know intimately, the society of the town chiefly consisting in that of the well-to-do tradesman or old-fashioned people to whom I have already referred. Of the county folk I knew nothing, nor was likely to do so. They would not take the trouble to call upon me, a fresh unsophisticated school-girl, and I was sure that my mother would resent the act as a patronage. She was the same good manager as of old, her well-stocked store-closet and larder gave the same indications of thrift and good management as heretofore: but I wanted something more than this now. The stiff drawing-room, whose quaint old-fashioned furniture had been familiar from childhood, now



irritated and perplexed me. Its very tidiness was provoking. I longed to pull the sofa out from the wall, to drag the table-cloth awry, to make a bonfire of the old books with their cheap engravings which adorned the table, arranged corner-wise one above another in aggravating symmetry. But there it all remained as of old. The square piano, the old clock on the mantel-piece, with the pair of lustres at each end, which were relieved by two spill-boxes containing the proper number of spills made from the backs of old letters with which my dear mother duly supplied them. All this was very aggravating to me, and not the less so because I could not make my mother see that they were ugly and unmeaning in themselves. What had been good enough for her, she argued, might be good enough for me; that she regretted my London education if it had only sent me home with fine-lady airs which taught me to despise my home; and in short, she indicated in her decisive way that

the subject was one which she did not desire to discuss. Seeing that no form of argument would prevail with her, I next appealed to my father, but to my surprise found him almost as obdurate as she appeared to be. To my entreaty that he would make the house more presentable, and visit among his patients, of whom there now appeared to be a goodly number, he shook his head with a sad smile, as if the request contained some occult reason for its refusal. The silence and reserve with which he treated the subject irritated me: I was eighteen now, fit to be companionable and share some of his confidences. I had been deemed sufficiently presentable for the London drawing-rooms of my friends, whose social scale was far above that of the Halton people, and yet my desire to know someone beyond our family circle in this obscure town seemed to be regarded as an anomalous request which was not to be taken into consideration for a moment. Was I always to live this life? Already

I felt its monotony pall upon me, for I had been flattered and petted by my school friends, who had taught me sufficient of the world's ways to give me a longing for more. I had ridden along Rotten Row in company with my friend Mary Leslie, whose cousin lived at Wentworth in the big house which I knew so well by reputation; I had sat behind Lord Eustone's high-stepping horses, chatting freely with his daughter Cecile who had been another companion of my school-life; and yet, forsooth, I was to be imprisoned within the four walls of my own home, because my parents chose to have old-fashioned or eccentric notions about society. "Why," I urged, "should this be so? Could we not afford to entertain our friends, or was it simply because my parents did not desire to do so?"

We were driving along the road which led from our town towards the village of Milford, on a warm day towards the end of June, when I put this question to my father. The heat

was slightly oppressive in our small brougham, and probably he found it so, for he took off his hat and passed his hand through his hair before he answered me.

“I am sorry, my dear, that you are not contented with your home,” he said quietly. “I was afraid it might be so: but you must be patient. Perhaps it will be better in the future.”

“How can it be better,” I asked petulantly, “unless we make it so? If we voluntarily place ourselves in an obscure position we cannot expect people to seek us. I have been at home now since Easter, and during all this time have not met with one person with whom I felt myself upon intimate terms.”

“Whom do you wish to know?” asked my father. “Whom, of all the people in Halton, would you like to choose for a friend?”

I paused: there was no one. Kate and Ellen Thorburn, the ironmonger’s daughters, would have been—I knew—only too glad to

claim me as an acquaintance; but those days in which I had known them as children were past and gone now, and there were no girls with whom I felt anything in common.

“I don’t know,” I faltered. “I don’t think that I meant the people of Halton exactly.”

“Who is there besides?”

“Why, the people you visit,” I answered, reddening a little; “you seem to know them well enough, and they all regard you as a friend. Why should they not know us?”

“Because they won’t, I suppose,” said my father briefly.

My face flushed more deeply. “Why not?” I said angrily; “are we not fit for them to visit?”

It was my father’s turn to flush now, which he did. A faint pink tinge flooded over his pale face as he said: “People will often make a friend of their doctor without being willing to know his family also.”

I swallowed down the bitter mortification

which stung my sensitive nature to the quick. "I understand," I said calmly: "then neither will we know them."

My father noticed the pain in my voice which I had taken such pains to conceal. "You forget," he said; "people have had no opportunity of knowing you hitherto, and I have had neither money nor position to justify me in holding a place in the society which is most congenial to me. One object that I have had in educating you so well, has been that you should be fit for any position in life which may offer itself, and you must be grateful for this, and not give yourself up to gloomy reflections."

"I do not think I am likely to do that," I answered, feeling that in spite of all things there was a buoyancy within me which gave to the future a certain amount of hopefulness. "Now that I have come home, perhaps people will find all this out, and will wish to visit us. But then—oh! Father, how could we ask any one to our house in its present state?"

“We cannot,” he said resignedly.

“Then we must make it better,” I persisted, coming back to the old vexed question with childish pertinacity.

“That is impossible: I cannot afford to do it.”

The expression may have borne another construction than that which I put upon it, but nevertheless it irritated me. I could only regard it in one light, which was, that my father imagined that he had not sufficient means to live like other people and entertain hospitably. How could he talk of poverty when our education had cost him so much? Edmund was now at college, Agnes still at school, and Mildred under the care of the governess who had succeeded Miss Marks in the household. I knew that it was all regularly paid for, and that my father's practice was increasing. The idea of poverty must be an infatuation of his own brain. I said fretfully:

“I do not see much use in my having been

sent to school, then, if I am to live all my life in the manner that I am doing at present."

My father smiled a faint smile; then putting his arm round me, he kissed my cheek, as he said gently:

"Come, Ella, do not be discontented, but hope for the best. My child, if I can bear it, surely you may do so."

I looked up hurriedly into his face. Was this true? Could he also know what it was to feel ruffled, soured, and disappointed, as I too often had felt within the last few months? Did that account for his sad face and reserved manner? In one moment I was ashamed of myself, and would have burst into a torrent of remorseful self-reproach, had not my thoughts been diverted into another channel.

"Why, Father!" I exclaimed, as the carriage turned off from the main road, and then diverging suddenly, brought us up to the lodges of Milford Park; "are you going in here? you did not tell me so."



“Yes,” he answered. “I am sorry to say that Sir Leopold is in very bad health. But I shall not be long; you will not mind waiting in the carriage for me, will you?”

“No, not at all,” I replied. I was accustomed now to these visits of my father’s, who frequently allowed me to accompany him on his round of professional calls, and as I was usually supplied with a book I was generally oblivious as to the length of time they lasted. It had brought us much closer together than in the old days when I knew so little about him. I quite enjoyed the little talks which our companionship afforded. But I had never been to Milford House with him before, though I had known the Park from my childhood. Years ago, when I was quite a little girl, I had been brought there by my mother, upon one of those childish expeditions in which the Thorburns had participated. We had romped on the lawn, scampered through the kitchen garden, and chased a score of young rabbits

who must have resented such an intrusion upon their own domains. In addition we had been all over the house, had even visited Lady Milford's private rooms, and seen the pictures of her two sons taken when they were children. But we had never been permitted to pay another such visit. I recollect my father's grave face when he sternly remonstrated with my mother for the intrusion, regardless of her excuse that "other people did so." Since that time I had only seen the Park from the lodges, with many a longing desire to penetrate into its cool glades, or to wander upon the soft springing grass. The recollection of my father's displeasure had caused a certain amount of reserve in speaking of it; and beyond the fact that he visited at the house in his professional capacity, we knew nothing more of the family.

Through the spaces formed by the trees we now caught vistas of smoothly-shaven lawn and artistically arranged flower-beds, showing

masses of bright colour between the green foliage. The house itself was old—tradition declared some four or five centuries in age—and its ugly, grey, castellated walls could be seen at intervals, looking picturesque enough at this moment as the afternoon sun gilded them. The undulating slope of ground which swept away from the front appeared to raise the house to a higher eminence than it really boasted, and the more recently built wing with its turreted tower—strangely out of keeping with the rest of the mansion—stood out in bold relief against the sky, whence it could be seen for some distance.

The gate was opened to us by an old woman who dropped a respectful curtsey as the carriage entered, and we drove silently along the avenue till we came to the slight iron railing which separated the lawn and flower-garden from the Park. And now the house was in full view, no longer grim and stiff as it appeared to the outer world, but smiling in a

glow of sunshine which bathed its windows with a flood of brightness. The ribbon-borders were as perfect as if the hand of Flora herself had designed them, the perfume of the roses was wafted to us upon the delicate breeze which stirred their fragrant petals. A huge mass of jessamine was intermingling its star-like blossoms with sprays of honeysuckle as they clustered and twined round the old-fashioned casements, and sprang upwards to meet again in arches of flower and foliage. Several of the windows were open, and as we passed along in front of the terrace I caught a vision of a fair head bent over some work, which I was certain must belong to the Lady Constance herself.

When we arrived at the door, my father turned the handle of his own carriage and walked up the broad flight of steps, giving a loud peal at the bell, which resounded throughout the house. I wished we had a footman to do all this for us ; perhaps then our visit might

be deemed a little more important. The remembrance of my father's words rankled within me, and made my heart glow hotly. I hastily drew out my book, not daring to cast a glance towards the hall door which very soon opened to admit my father and then was closed again. But I was not reading a word of the page before me: I was wildly and unreasonably angry with the people who would not know us, who would admit my father into their confidences and ignore his family. I sat as far back into my corner as I could, my two feet propped upon the cushion before me, the billowy folds of my light muslin dress falling in graceful curves over my knees. In the pocket of the brougham was a tiny looking-glass which my father always carried about with him. I stealthily abstracted it, and laying it upon my lap, regarded my own face, bending down over it so as to prevent any chance observer from a window seeing it also. And this was what I saw,—a clear, fair, complexion,

which excitement and fresh air had dyed with a rosy bloom, a pair of grey-blue eyes which looked mockingly at me from under their white lids, and above all a mass of golden hair through which gleams of a reddish tint shone and sparkled in the sunlight. I suppose the result was satisfactory, for I smiled, partly in amusement, partly with pleasure, which was reflected back from my opposite self with a certain glance of satirical humour, as from one who understood the matter perfectly, and sympathised with me.

I was startled by the opening of the hall door, and surreptitiously endeavoured to slip the glass back into its place before my father could observe my movement. But it was not my father. A servant advanced towards the carriage with the announcement that her ladyship particularly desired that I would walk in, and the rosy flush mounted to my temples as I heard the gracious command given. My first impulse was to refuse. Why should I enter

the house of one who was ever likely to be a stranger? Then second thoughts, which are sometimes best, warned me that if I did not take this opportunity which offered itself I might never have another, and so, inclining my head in proud assent, I descended from the carriage and followed the footman into the drawing-room.

I felt a little nervous as I heard my name announced in a loud tone of voice, and hoped that the slight veil of spotted net which covered my face would sufficiently conceal the bright red spot which seemed to actually burn my cheeks.

The room into which I was ushered was larger than any that we had in Halton, and seemed altogether a blaze of flowers and mirrors, lace and magnificent work. There were beautifully carved tables, tiny chairs and chiffoniers in black and gold, with old china displaying itself in unnatural attitudes in impossible places. Inverted cups and saucers which looked as if they had forgotten the

relationship which they bore to one another, or had had a family quarrel, were placed like naughty children upon pedestals in the corner. Moonfaced plates looked down with melancholy disdain upon their humbler brethren who were stowed away in glass-fronted cupboards, or smilingly reminded their infatuated admirers that they were above the use for which nature had intended them. But all these details I was obliged to take in at a glance, for a lady rose from her corner by the window as I approached, and came forward.

She was "tall and shapely," rather than actually pretty; but oh, the grace of her movements as she glided forward to greet me! Her hands were long and slender, white as ivory, with pink-tipped fingers like the delicate colouring of a shell, and as she extended one towards me she smiled, showing a glimpse of pearl-like teeth between the parted lips.

"How do you do, Miss Hamilton?" she said with frank courtesy. "I am sorry that you



should have been left outside. I was not aware of it till your father mentioned that you were with him."

"Thank you," I answered timidly, "it is of no consequence, I am quite accustomed to sitting in the carriage when I go out with my father."

I said this with a slight inflection of pride, despite my timidity. I would not give the Lady Constance an idea that I wished to be invited into her presence.

"Do you often go out with him?" she asked, without appearing to heed my manner.

"Yes, rather often. He likes company when he is not too busy, and it is a pleasure to me to drive with him."

"You have not been here before, I think, however?" she asked again.

"No, not before." My eyes were cast upon the ground now, in shame for what I felt to be a slight evasion.

"I think your name is Ella, is it not?"

The question was quietly put, but it surprised me. How could she have already heard of it, and from whom? Had my father so far entered into his family history as to tell her the names of his children?"

"Yes," I replied, "my name is Ella. I have not long been at home; I only returned from school at Easter."

"Indeed! It must be a great pleasure to you to come home again after so long an absence?"

I faltered and blushed once more. I could not say that which I felt to be untrue, neither could I allow Lady Constance Milford to suppose that I was unhappy. I became conscious that I was drawing patterns with my parasol upon the thick velvet pile of the carpet, and only raised my head in answer to her next question.

"And what do you find to amuse you, now that you are at home?"

It was so delicately put, as if interest rather than curiosity prompted it, that I could not

feel offended ; but the question startled me. It was almost as if she had divined the subject of my thoughts as I had driven thitherward, and intended to upbraid me for my want of contentment as my father had done. But she should not know—if I could help it—the thoughts which had been clashing within me. I would put a good face upon the matter in spite of my inner feelings. “I don’t know,” I faltered : “I practise and read, and work, and go out with my father sometimes. I do not do much besides,” I added.

“Have you many companions of your own age ?”

This was getting too pointed. I wished Lady Constance would leave off her cross-questioning and talk about something pleasanter. Doubtless it might be a token of kindly interest in me, but it was one which I resented.

“No,” I answered boldly, wishing to be brave over my grievance, and yet slightly

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glorying in it. "I have no companions but my sisters. My father is very particular about us. I suppose we might have some if we chose to do so, but he does not care about our knowing many people."

"Oh."

There was silence after this for the space of half a minute, during which I secretly wondered whether I had been rash in thus giving utterance to my thoughts. Of course it was impossible that Lady Constance could understand all these trivial details which must have been so unimportant to her. When she spoke again, it was of the weather and not of me; then books, then work, then books again; and finally she remembered one which she was herself reading, and recommended my perusal of it.

"It may help to beguile an hour when you have nothing else to do," she added indifferently, and there was nothing in either her tone or her words which could lead me to the

supposition that she meant more than was expressed ;—but I was in a sensitive mood.

“ Thank you,” I replied, as I glanced rapidly through the pages. “ It looks nice. But you must not fancy that I cannot find anything to do.”

She looked at me with a look in which both surprise and amusement were blended as she answered apologetically :

“ Not in the least, I only thought that you would enjoy it sometimes on a wet afternoon, perhaps, or when you were not in the mood for other things.”

“ Thank you,” I said again, feeling a little uneasy at my transparent candour which had already laid bare my inner thoughts to this stranger.

“ I hope you will come and see me again sometimes,” she said again, after the cleverness of her parrot had been discussed, and the beauty of her lap-dog admired. “ We live very quietly, on account of my husband’s health,

but it will give us great pleasure if you care to come out so far.”

“You are very kind,” I said warmly, as my face glowed with pleasure; “it would be delightful if I might—if you would have me.”

The realization of my hopes had come so unexpectedly, and the invitation was so naturally given, that I could not but respond heartily.

“It would be very nice,” I repeated, all former doubts vanishing from my mind in a moment.

“I should be very glad if you can,” said the lady kindly. “I have heard your father speak of you; so you see you are not quite a stranger.”

So my father had talked about me to this lady whom I had barely seen before. What could he have said about me? What interest could have been created that she should ask me to visit her? The question had barely time to revolve itself in my mind before the door opened, and my father himself entered,

coming in unannounced, and sitting down in an arm-chair just as he would have sat in his own at home, with perfect ease and self-possession.

“Oh, he is better,” he said coolly—giving his information before it was asked—“decidedly better. If I were you I would have out the horses and give him a drive. A little fresh air would do him good on a fine day like this.”

I saw Lady Constance glance hurriedly towards him, and then for the first time he seemed to see me, who, seated in one of the large windows, was partly concealed by the heavily embroidered lace curtain which hung before it.

“Ah! Ella, are you there?” he asked. “I thought you were waiting for me in the carriage.”

“No, indeed,” answered our hostess; “you don’t suppose I should have allowed her to sit there while you and I were having our usual gossip.”

“ Oh, it wouldn't have hurt her,” he said carelessly ; “ but it was very kind of you to ask her to come in.” He smiled as he spoke, and looked more cheerful than usual.

Lady Constance looked again at him, then answered graciously : “ The kindness was to me. We have been making acquaintance.” She glanced from him to me as she spoke, and I, thinking she would expect some answer in return, felt confused. How could I say that she was the most charming, the most graceful person that I had ever seen ? I coloured nervously and said nothing.

“ So you really find Leopold better ? ” she asked, changing the subject abruptly.

“ Yes, to-day he is, certainly. But he varies a great deal, as you know, and the nature of his complaint is deceitful. However, if you intend to go out, I advise you to go at once before the day grows too late. It is perfection now for driving.”

“ Yes, it is,” she answered, looking out of



the window as she spoke, but not as if she cared to go out. "Please don't go," she added; "tea will be brought in, in ten minutes, if you can wait that length of time."

"I am afraid not," said my father, "I have to see another patient before I go home, and it is already growing late. Besides, it is time that you should be starting if you are going out with your husband. Come, Ella, you must say good-bye." And in spite of a certain expression of disappointment which clouded the lady's face, he rose and prepared to take leave.

"You will come again and see me, I hope," she said, as she held out her hand at parting; "and remember the next time, that I shall not allow you to run away so soon," she added playfully.

"Then I am afraid she must not come out with me," said my father. "Run on, my child, to the carriage; I am coming directly."

Thinking that he wished to have some professional conversation, I left the room, and

made my way out to the brougham ; but I had hardly seated myself before I remembered that I had left my parasol upon the sofa where I had at first sat upon my entrance into the house.

I was too shy to indicate to the tall, imposing-looking servant that I wished to speak to him ; so I stepped out of the carriage and stealthily made my way back to the drawing-room.

My father and Lady Constance stood by the mantel-piece talking, and both had their backs turned towards me as I entered. I could not hear a word of their conversation, which was low and earnest, but I gathered sufficient information from their faces to make sure that it was not intended for my ears. Then I stole back guiltily, having possessed myself of the parasol which was lying on the sofa just within the door, wondering, as I did so, what Sir Leopold's complaint could be which required so many parting instructions. By the time that

my father reached the carriage I was comfortably seated once more ; the billowy muslin fell gracefully over my knees as before, as I leaned back against the cushions. One more parting now, and we were off.

Then the string of my tongue became loosened, and I poured forth my delight in babbling excitement.

“Dear Father!” I exclaimed, seizing his hand with warmth, “how kind of you to take me to this nice house! And how charming Lady Constance is!—but it seems so strange that you should never have said anything about her when you appear to know her so well.”

My father smiled, perhaps with amusement at my vehemence. “It would not do for me to speak of all my patients, dear child,” he said gently.

“No, of course not; but of this one you might. How pretty she is, and how graceful! How old do you suppose she is, Father dear?”

“Oh, not very young,” he answered care-

lessly; "more than thirty, I should think; quite an old woman to you, Ella."

"No, not at all; she does not look old. She is so young and fresh in her manner, and so very very kind. I don't think I ever met with anyone with whom I felt so intimate at first. Is she always as nice when you know her?"

"Yes, I think so," replied my father. "I am glad you have taken such a fancy to her, because, if you like, you may go and see her again."

"I should like to know her immensely," I said warmly, "and I thought it was so good of her to ask me to visit her. It must be on your account, Father dear; you always make yourself so popular."

He laughed at this as if pleased at my flattery: "Of course in one's professional capacity one becomes much more intimate than an ordinary visitor, my dear, and I have attended the family now for many years. I was with Sir Leopold's father and mother when they

died; naturally I am no stranger to them.” Then his face clouded over a little, and I feared he was going to relapse into one of his fits of silence, which I was anxious to prevent, feeling so talkative myself.

“Do tell me some more,” I said, twining my fingers round his slender hand, which looked lamentably transparent beside my own plump palm, now rendered more so by the effect of my tight-fitting kid glove. “I want to know all about them. Have they any children, or do they live alone in that great big house?”

“They have one child—a little boy,” said my father. “I am surprised that you did not see him, for he is usually with his mother.”

“No; she was alone all the time, so that I had her undivided attention myself. And I assure you I found it very pleasant. She talked to me so naturally, you know, and asked me all about my home and my companions, and so forth.”

“ And you told her all your troubles, I suppose, and confessed that you had such hard-hearted parents that they would not allow you to know anybody.”

“ No, no; I didn't do that quite, because it would not be true. We do know some people, a good many, in fact, although we know nobody well. But I did tell her that I had no companions except my sisters.”

“ And did she pity you very much? ”

“ No; she only said ‘ Oh.’ I thought it was as well to say that it was your wish; otherwise she might have thought that the fault was our own.”

“ You might have excepted the Thorburns, might you not? ” said my father; “ you see them occasionally, don't you? ”

“ Not very often,” I answered; “ I have only been there once since I came home, though they have been twice to see me. I thought, if we had time, I should run in now after our drive. I don't want them to think

me ill-natured, and, after all, we did know them well when we were children.”

“Yes; you must not drop them entirely,” said my father in an encouraging tone. “Mrs. Thorburn was asking for you a few days ago. She has been very poorly, and I think she would be glad to see you. I am going to pay her a visit now, so you had better defer yours till to-morrow.”

“Very well,” I answered cheerfully, feeling that I could afford to be gracious; “you may tell her that I will come in to-morrow afternoon, and that I am sorry to hear that she is not well.”

In this amiable frame of mind I arrived at home, determined to be pleased with everything around me, and not to allow the spirit of discontent to mar the effect of my pleasant visit. But I had to school myself to this, as the sight of my own rather dingy-looking home met my eye, and contrasted so painfully with the fairyland of flowers and ornaments which

I had just left. My mother was sitting at the parlour window, sewing, and looked up with a smile of greeting before she came to the door to meet me.

“Well, my child, have you had a pleasant drive?” she asked, as she kissed me.

“Yes, mother; a most delightful drive. And where do you think we have been to?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure, Ella.”

“To Milford House,” I said eagerly.

My mother’s face flushed slightly.

“Have you, indeed?” she asked.

“Yes; and Lady Constance is the most delightful person I ever saw. She has asked me to go again soon.”

“Really? Very condescending of her, I’m sure,” said my mother, in a tone which seemed to imply the reverse; but I would not see it.

“Yes, I think it was; and so I’m going.”

“Oh, indeed!” said my mother again, and I could not tell whether she was angry or pleased, or a little of both.



I broke away from her and ran upstairs. My ardour was damped at this reception of my news. No wonder that we had not friends when their intended kindness was so chillingly responded to. And my mother was unkind as well as proud, for she allowed the effect of her pride to fall upon her children. But I would not be daunted by her manner ; I would take the sweets of life as they fell to me. Lady Constance had asked me to visit her, and I would do so. Who could tell to what the acquaintance might lead ? At any rate it was better than living on in obscurity, as I was at present, unknown, unheeded, and uncared for. The very thought made the tears fill my eyes. No ; I would fulfil the destiny which heaven had intended for me. I would know Lady Constance Milford.

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## CHAPTER III.

## THE THORBURNS.

“Life, indeed, is not  
The thing we planned it out . . .  
And then, we women cannot choose our lot.”  
*Owen Meredith.*

I MADE no complaint to my mother about the conduct which I had so much resented in her, and tried not to allow my feelings to become apparent in my behaviour. But I was determined to maintain a strict reserve about the lady whose manner I had found so charming; and as my mother asked me no questions, rather to my disappointment, this resolution was easily adhered to for the space of twenty-

four hours. The next morning I had time to indulge in day-dreams, for she seemed longer than usual over her household occupations; and as I sat at the needlework with which my fingers were employed, my busy fancy was weaving a wonderful web of life, in which all its intricacies proved only to be a plain path leading to the centre of my hopes. What those hopes were, was rather indefinable, even to myself, except that they were forerunners of something which was very delightful, and served to lift my heart above the petty cares from which, like all the rest of the world, I was not wholly free.

I had not forgotten my promise to visit Mrs. Thorburn, and, accordingly, surprised my mother in the afternoon by announcing my intention of doing so.

“It is so long since I was there,” I added, “and it seems she was asking Father about me; so, as you have to go out with Mildred, I might as well take this opportunity.”

“Yes, certainly,” said my mother, in a

pleased voice. "I am sure Mrs. Thorburn will be glad to have you, and especially if you go in alone. If I were to go also, she might think that I had induced you to do so."

"Very well," I said, laughing, "then we will suffer no unworthy motive to have weight in my breast. I am going to give Mrs. Thorburn the pleasure of my company, and to enjoy that of hers."

But as I put on the pretty little hat which my own fingers had manufactured, I secretly wished that it might be Lady Constance Milford whom I was going to visit, and not my humble friend. If I could only meet her upon any other terms than that of an equal I should be better satisfied; but after knowing her, as I had, from my infancy, how could I patronise her as an inferior? I trotted down the street at a brisk pace, and, in a minute or so, found myself at the ironmonger's door. He was busy himself, serving a customer, as I entered, but had time to give me a hearty nod of recog-

nition in token of friendliness, while I crossed to the other side and asked of George, the son, if his mother was at home. On his answer in the affirmative I made my way to the back of the shop, and through the door which led towards the staircase, up which I had to pass to reach the parlour above. As I ascended, I glanced momentarily through the window which was partially the means of imparting light to the back passage, and then I saw that the stranger whom Mr. Thorburn was serving was looking at me as I did so. He was a tall, fine-looking man about thirty, whose face was quite unfamiliar to me, and he appeared to be buying a pair of spurs; but conscious of his gaze, I hastily ran upstairs, and lost sight of him instantly.

Mrs. Thorburn was sitting in the parlour by her sewing - machine, while her eldest daughter, Annie, was employed in making button-holes in some new shirt-fronts. They both looked up at my entrance and smiled,

and then Annie rose from her seat and came towards me. She was a tall, big girl, with a sallow complexion, and snub nose, but she had a good-natured expression, and spoke kindly.

“I am glad to see you, Ella,” she said, shaking hands with me warmly, and I think she would have kissed me if I had shown any willingness for such an act of demonstration. “You are quite a stranger to us now, it is so long since you have been here. Kate and Ellen are out, I am sorry to say.”

“Indeed? that’s unfortunate, for I cannot stay very long. But I came to see you, Mrs. Thorburn; I was sorry to hear that you were not well.”

“No love, thank you. I’ve had the neuralgia very bad lately; but it’s better now, thank God.”

“Yes, mother was quite ill with it,” said Annie; “we were obliged to send for the doctor to her, before it left her.”

“ Yes, it’s a nasty pain is neuralgia,” said the mother. “ But how are you my dear, yourself, and the family ? ”

“ Oh, we are all very well, thanks,” I answered rather curtly. “ How lovely the weather is just now ! I went for such a pleasant drive yesterday with Father.”

The remembrance of it was so fresh in my mind that it seemed but natural to give utterance to my thoughts ; but Mrs. Thorburn could only half imagine how pleasant that drive had been.

“ Yes, we saw you pass the window,” said Annie ; and Mrs. Thorburn remarked at the same time, “ And it does you good, my dear, to have your Pa’s society a little.”

I did not know what Mrs. Thorburn meant to insinuate by this remark, or whether she pitied my loneliness ; but fearful that she would follow it up by proposing to see more of me, I cast about in my mind for another topic which would prove as interesting, and

plunged into a description of the country as it appeared to me yesterday. But her attention was evidently not riveted by my eloquent narration of the beauties of nature; for while I was speaking she was gazing out of the window, and following her eyes I became aware of the object which attracted them. A horse was tied before the door, which must have been standing there as I came in, but which I had not observed upon my hurried entrance. Now, however, the gentleman whom I had seen in the shop as I passed through it, came out, and after a few minutes' delay in fitting the spurs which he had just purchased, mounted the horse and rode away, not without one or two glances in the direction of our window.

Of course I could not be so rude as to stare, though I really longed to see what he was like, and there were many conjectures from my friends as to who he could possibly be. Mrs. Thorburn was almost sure that she had seen him before, but when or where she could not



recollect. We all knew the people of Halton too well to suppose that he was one of them, and Mrs. Thorburn did not scruple to look at and discuss his appearance, much to my annoyance.

“He’s a fine-looking fellow, my dear, just you look—and has money too, I’ll be bound: only see his beautiful ring!”

“Oh, Mother, I can’t,” said Annie, who appeared more alive to the situation than her less-discerning mother. “He’ll see us if we stare at him so, and must know that we are talking about him. There, he is looking up,” and her sallow face became suddenly crimson as she drew back behind the window.

“Well, to be sure, you needn’t redden up so,” said her mother. “He isn’t looking at you, I’ll bet a penny.” And she deliberately bent her head forward, and looked after him as he rode up the street.

“What odious manners,” I thought, disgusted, my face scarcely less rosy than Annie’s.

“How did I ever come to know these people, and how can I continue to do so?” I deliberately kept silence, hoping that my manner would express the disapprobation which I felt, and pondered in my mind what subject I could speak upon next, which would give mutual interest to all parties. It seemed as if we had nothing in common; their knowledge of the world was even less than my own. Neither books, music, nor pictures could interest them, family matters brought us into too close contact, and to gossip I would not condescend.

I was glad when the entrance of the two younger sisters brought a fresh idea into the conversation. They were much nicer-looking girls than Annie, Helen especially, and the colour which they brought in from their fresh country walk made them look almost pretty. I had seen so little of them now for some years that they had grown rather shy with me, which the reserve that I showed towards them generally did not tend to overcome. Like

Annie, they seemed anxious to be cordial without knowing how to express themselves, and greeted me with a little giggle of rather nervous laughter, in token of their pleasure at seeing me. I shook hands with them in a condescending way, remarked upon the beauty of the day, and inquired if they had had a pleasant walk.

“Yes, very,” said Kate, showing a handful of kingcups which she held. “We have been down to the river gathering these. And oh, Ma, what do you think? There was such a swell there riding about and playing tricks with his horse. I really thought he was doing it on purpose to tease us; didn’t you, Helen?”

“Yes, that I did,” answered her sister, “for he was prancing about quite close to us, and I thought he’d ’ave run over us, once or twice.”

“Law! how dangerous!” exclaimed the mother.

“No, I don’t think so, really,” said Kate. “He was only playing, and I think he saw

we were frightened, for he spoke to us once, and told us not to mind."

"I daresay he was the very same as has been here," said Annie; "a big man was he, without whiskers?"

"Yes, rather big," answered Kate. "He had a thick moustache though—such a beauty it was! I hope when George has a little more his will be like that."

"And do you say he spoke to you?" asked Mrs. Thorburn. "What did he say, my dear?"

"Oh, not much," answered Helen as she took off her hat, and smoothed her brown hair with her hands. "He only told us not to be afraid, the horse was all right. Something like that I think it was."

"Indeed, then it was very polite of him," said the mother. "I wonder whoever he can be. He's a stranger in Halton, I'm sure. When Pa comes up we'll ask him; he's pretty sure to know."

During this conversation I sat silent, but the prospect of Pa's coming up, no matter how distant it might be, was too much for me to contemplate calmly. He, like the rest of the family, was always disposed to be kind, but was almost too overpowering. There was a swagger about him which all, except George, entirely lacked. The women of the party, though common, were not obtrusively vulgar, but the assumption of his manner was annoying to me beyond expression. As soon as I could rise without showing great signs of haste in my movements, I did so, cordially shaking hands all round, in happy feelings of relief that this visit had come to an end, and mentally resolving that it would be a long time before I paid another.

I passed a quiet evening with my mother and Mildred—too quiet, perhaps—for I was in no mood to talk. Why was it, I thought, that Heaven had placed me in such a peculiar position that the only available friends I had were people with whom it was impossible

to associate? I tried to assure myself that I loved my home and my family, but I could not be contented with my surroundings. I wondered if I was very cross, very wrong, or whether it was the trial with which God meant to afflict me. At last, after my little sister had gone to bed, I could bear the silence no longer. My impulsive nature longed for some outlet in which it could unburden its bitterness, and throwing down my book upon the table, I suddenly exclaimed :

“Mother, why is it that we are such unfortunate people?”

“Unfortunate, Ella?” she repeated, though her voice trembled slightly; “what can you mean, my dear?”

“Oh, I mean in everything,” I answered. “I know you and Father meant to be very kind in sending me to school, and allowing me to meet with people in another rank of life, but I almost wish you had not done so, Mother.”

“Why, my child?”

“Because I feel that it has unsettled me. Perhaps if I had never known anything but Halton manners and Halton ways I should have been contented with them; and now—oh, I can’t tell you how discontented I feel.”

“But it was just that which your Father did not wish, Ella. It was to prevent your becoming accustomed to Halton manners and Halton ways, that he had you sent to school.”

“Yes, and much good it has done. I come back now, and find myself without companions, without friends. Those whom I would know will not know me, and those who wish to know me I cannot tolerate.”

My mother winced as if my words caused her pain. “I am so sorry,” she murmured.

“Yes, but your sorrow does not alter these facts, and you do not seem willing to alter them. When I went to see Lady Constance Milford yesterday, and she asked me to visit her again, I told you of it with all the pleasure that I felt. But you took it so coolly that I

felt chilled at once, almost as if you were offended with her for giving me the kind invitation."

"Not at all," said my mother. "On the contrary I was very glad; nothing would give me greater pleasure than for you to visit her if it will make you happy."

"Yes, but you do not say it now as if you felt quite cordial about it. I suppose if she asked me to her house it would involve an exchange of visits."

To this my mother answered nothing.

"Mother, do you hear what I am saying? Would you visit Lady Constance Milford yourself?"

"No, my dear, I would not."

"Why not?"

"Because I could not consent to know anyone on such terms."

"You mean that you think she will patronise us?"

"I did not say so."



“But you mean it, I know. Well, then, let us visit her upon other terms. Let us call upon her as a friend, and ask her to come and see us.”

My mother smiled a rather bitter smile. “Make your mind quite easy about that, child; Lady Constance will never call upon us.”

“Not if we were to make the house prettier, and spend a little money upon it?”

“Not if we spent ever so much money upon it.”

The tears filled my eyes, but I brushed them away hastily. “Then, of course, I can’t know her,” I said huskily

“Yes, you can,” said my mother in an encouraging tone. “There is nothing to prevent your going there if she asks you to do so. It is so different for me, you see. Besides, I do not care about it.”

But there was not much encouragement in this.

“It is so unfortunate,” I said, “because we

seem to have no other friends. Those Thorburns are very decent people; but fancy our ever having them as acquaintances! How did we come to know them in the first place?"

"It was a long time ago, before you were born, Ella, said my mother. Mr. Thorburn was once very kind to your father, and of course we cannot forget it."

"How do you mean? In what way was he kind? Did he lend him money, or save him from drowning, or do anything of that kind?"

"Well — something like that," said my mother slowly.

"Oh, if that is all, surely Father could soon pay him, and there would be an end of it."

"There are other debts besides those of money," said my mother.

"Well, I daresay dear Father feels very grateful for it all, and perhaps will do a kindness for him some day, but that is no reason why we should make bosom friends of them all."

“I do not think we do,” said my mother, flushing, as I thought, rather angrily. “You don’t, for one, I’m sure.”

“No, and I don’t intend to,” I said independently. “But now we have named two sets of people at each end of the pole, who is there in the middle? Those stupid, sleepy-looking Glanfords, and Mr. and Mrs. Barton, and the Binbrooks and old Miss Burlington—oh dear, oh dear!” and I sighed deeply.

“Well, Ella, I’m very sorry for you,” said my mother, but with more reproof than pity in her voice. “It’s very disappointing to your father and me to see you so unsettled now that you have come home. In fact, I don’t see what is to be the end of it.”

“Nor I,” said I sadly. “I don’t wish to be unsettled, but I can’t help it. I feel such a longing desire to be happy and light-hearted; and sometimes when I am out walking in the lovely green lanes, and hear the birds singing over my head, I could scream out for very

joy. But then when I come home there is the same old sense of something not quite right, and I lose heart in reading or practising my music, when it is all for nothing."

"But it need not be for nothing, and we don't wish it to be so," said my mother. "It may prove very useful to you one day."

"Never : so long as I live here," I said emphatically.

"Well, then, how would you like to go and live elsewhere?" said my mother. "How would you like to go out as a companion or a governess to somebody?"

"That would depend upon the situation that I found," I answered curtly; "I should not like any menial office."

"I suppose it would not be more menial for you than it is for thousands of other people who have to earn their bread," said my mother, "and you have been sufficiently well-educated to undertake such a situation."

I thought we were discussing the subject

merely in the abstract, and entered into it. "I suppose it is not so very dreadful when one is used to it," I remarked.

"It need not be dreadful at all," said my mother, "if you live in a family that you like, and at any rate you will have the opportunity of seeing other people besides those of Halton."

"Mother," I asked, looking up suddenly, "are you serious in all this?"

"Yes, my child, certainly. Why should I not be so?"

"Because it seems so strange," I said musingly. "I could not fancy myself in such a position."

"A great many people who are quite as good as you, have had to fancy it, Ella."

"Do you mean, then, that you would like me to try the experiment. Would Father like me to do so?"

"Yes, why not?"

"I dont know," I said slowly, "I have never

thought of it; it seems such a new, sudden idea."

"It is not quite new to us, though," said my mother. "Your father and I have talked it over once or twice lately, especially since we have seen that you were not quite happy at home. But, of course, it is for you to decide whether you would like to try the experiment."

I paused for a moment and reflected. Surely pecuniary difficulties could not have induced my father to think of this? Perhaps the education which he had given to us all had told heavily upon his income, and he felt himself obliged to retrench a little.

"Mother," I asked again, "do you think Father requires me to do this? Does he want money for—for Mr. Thorburn, or anything?"

"Well, child, I will not conceal from you that your father has borrowed money from Mr. Thorburn which has not been paid back to him yet. But I do not think that he wants

you to go out as a governess on that account only.”

I felt a glow of sensitive pride burning within me. Was it possible that we were under obligations to this vulgar uneducated man whose family I so despised? I remembered that my father had rather urged upon me the policy of paying Mrs. Thorburn a visit the day before, and that though he never was very intimate with them himself, he was at any rate cordial and polite. This was possibly the reason, and in my usual impulsive way I immediately jumped to the conclusion as certain. It would be a great consolation to me to know that by my own means this debt could be wiped out. What a satisfaction to feel that it was all over and paid for, and that we could let them down as we wished to do! I thought over it for some minutes, during which my mother preserved perfect silence, as if she, too, were pondering the subject. Then I spoke again, but cautiously, fearful that any

sudden resolve should be looked upon as decisive.

“I should like to think about this, dear Mother. If you and Father have already made up your minds about it, why, I may as well do so; but I shall be able to come to a better conclusion in a day or two, and meantime you can tell him that you have spoken to me.”

“Very well, Ella.” That was all she said; just like my mother’s usual decisive manner, which it must be owned I thought rather unsatisfactory. “If she would only tell me what she wishes herself,” I thought, “it would be so much easier for me to act upon her advice”; but it was evident that this was to be her final remark, unless I brought forth another by more agitating questions. I felt far from being satisfied by the turn which the conversation had taken. To be a governess would certainly be a new form of existence, but it was not altogether a palatable notion as yet. It would possibly take me into a new sphere of action,



and give me other ideas of life, but they might not be any pleasanter than those which I had at present. I wondered if my pupils would be likely to treat me as I had too often treated Miss Marks, and something very like remorse smote my breast for those old childish naughtinesses. Perhaps I, too, might have impertinence to tolerate, or insubordination to correct; I, who could not even manage my own wayward, troublesome self.

“Good-night, Mother,” I said, rising suddenly, “I think I will go to bed now, and you may tell Father what we have been talking about when he comes in.”

But when I held up my face to give her the kiss which was already formed upon my lips, I saw that her eyes were wet with tears, and that she was struggling for mastery over herself.

“Why, Mother,” I asked, “do I make you cry? I am so sorry.” And I put my arm affectionately round her.

“ Good-night, my child,” she answered tremulously, “ God bless you. I am sorry that I can’t make you happier.” And then, her lips quivering, she sat down again upon the chair from which she had risen, and took up the work which was lying upon the table beside her.

“ Oh, Mother,” I said reproachfully, “ don’t speak so. You do make me happy, and I do love my home. It is not with you that I am discontented, but only with myself.” Then I kissed her again, murmuring soft words of affection; and taking up my candle, departed, wondering as I wandered up the staircase why the world seemed so full of contradictions and snares and petty trials, and why our hearts were such troublesome things that we were always longing for that which we could not get.

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## CHAPTER IV.

## ANOTHER ASPECT OF LIFE.

“How sweet are looks that ladies bend on whom their favours fall.”

*Tennyson.*

ABOUT a week after this, I was sitting in the drawing-room with Mildred, when my father entered the room with a note in his hand. It proved to be from Lady Constance Milford, and was addressed to myself, requesting that I would lunch with her on the following day.

My face flushed with delight. I was almost afraid that she had forgotten her invitation to me, for a whole week had elapsed without my

having heard from her, during which I had only caught a glimpse of her in church. Upon that occasion she had not even glanced towards me, and I had followed her down the aisle and through the church-door without obtaining so much as a bow of recognition. But the note was very graciously expressed, hoping to see me early, and offering to call for me in the carriage at one o'clock. I read the note over once or twice, and then consigned it to my pocket, wondering, as I did so, how I should break the news to my mother and what she would think of it. Since that evening the week before, we had not mentioned the unpleasant subject which was then under discussion, nor had the idea of my being a governess been proposed a second time. I felt, therefore, a little shy in speaking of Lady Constance, not being quite sure of my position towards her. But I had been very dull lately, and the sight of this note seemed as a bright spot in the landscape which surrounded me, in which, but

for that, everything looked cloudy. Besides I had no time to refuse, for she would be expecting me, and would perhaps make some arrangement before the morning's post could reach her, and the prospect of another such visit as I had paid her the week before was too delightful to voluntarily relinquish. I therefore decided to accept the invitation, and immediately began planning what my dress was to be. Into this important discussion my little sister was drawn, whose admiration for myself was one of her chief points of attractiveness.

“Could you wear your white dress, Ella, with the blue ribbons?” she asked, “or would that be too dressy? or what do you think of your clean muslin? it only came home from the wash on Monday, and it is so beautifully goffered. Yes, wear that, do,—I know you will look lovely in it, and perhaps when Lady Constance sees you she will ask you to stay a week with her.”

A little thrill went through me at my sister's

words, though I was far from supposing that such a prospect was in store for me.

“Very well, Millie,” I answered patronisingly. “I will wear my blue muslin, and you shall help me to dress to-morrow if you are very good. Perhaps your turn may come, you know, some day, and you may be asked to Milford also, so you see how important it is to behave nicely.”

When my mother entered the room I drew the note from my pocket and handed it to her without speaking. I watched her furtively as she read it, and then, folding it up, handed it back to me, her face a little flushed, though I could not tell why.

“Well, Mother?” I said at length, seeing that she did not speak.

“Well, Ella.”

“Am I to go?” I asked, nettled at being thus obliged to do so before she would give an opinion.

“Yes, certainly; by all means.”

“You would really like it?”

“Yes, I wish you to go: I should be very sorry if you refused.”

“Then that is all right,” I said in a relieved tone as she left the room, untying the strings of her bonnet as she went.

The next day I was ready long before the time appointed, and with Mildred for my maid began to dress about eleven o'clock, so fearful was I of keeping Lady Constance waiting. I had felt in such a flutter of expectancy all the morning that I hardly knew what to do with myself, could “settle to nothing,” as my mother expressed it, and forgot to cover the jam with which she had charged me the day before. Mildred pirouetted about me in her eager desire to give assistance, now dancing to the other side of the room to see the effect of my sash, then coming closer to give it another finishing touch, which she had already done about a dozen times in the course of our operations. Finally the glass was placed upon

the floor in order that I might see whether the skirt had a proper "set," and we went through a pantomime of shaking hands, wherein Mildred acted the part of a very small countess in short petticoats and rather shabby shoes. In the midst of our preparations a message was brought upstairs by the servant to the effect that Kate Thorburn was in the drawing-room and would like to see me, but I was on the point of visiting an earl's daughter and had no time to bestow upon her, so I sent word that I was much engaged and could not possibly see her. I wondered if there would be great sensation at the window over the shop when I passed in Lady Constance's carriage, but I could not go down to the drawing-room to be put through a string of cross-questions from Kate's busy tongue. I therefore ensconced myself upon one of the old-fashioned window-seats to watch for the arrival of the carriage, and before long my patience was rewarded by the sight of the black, spirited horses dashing



up the street. My heart bounded as I sprang down the narrow staircase just as the thundering knock came to the door; and popping my head inside the drawing-room, I gave a brief nod, and departed, unheeding my mother's entreaty that I would come in and let her have a look at me.

"This is very good of you," was her ladyship's kind greeting as I stepped into the carriage. "You have not kept us waiting a moment. May I introduce my husband? Sir Leopold Milford—Miss Hamilton."

A pale, delicate-looking man, of apparently two or three and thirty, put out a limp hand for me to shake, bowing slightly as he did so; though at the same time he looked kindly at me, as if he felt some interest above that which the listless greeting would betoken. I nervously avoided his glance and turned to Lady Constance who was already talking gaily, and so soon felt interested in her conversation that I forgot we were driving through the High

Street, or my intention of looking up at the ironmonger's window.

After a drive of three or four miles we arrived at Milford House, by which time I felt quite at my ease with this new friend, and found myself chattering freely. A servant assisted Sir Leopold to alight, and he walked feebly up to the door and into the drawing-room, where he sat down as if quite overcome, and panting with the exertion. I felt almost alarmed, and wondered what could be the matter with him, but Lady Constance was apparently accustomed to seeing him so, for she took but little notice, and talked much as usual.

“Would you like to come upstairs?” she asked kindly, after we had remained seated for a few minutes. “Luncheon will be ready soon.” And she led the way herself up the old oak staircase.

A little childish voice sounded in our ears as we ascended.

“Mother,” it cried, “Mother, have ’oo come home? I’m tomin to meet ’oo.”

“Oh, there ’s Leo, my little boy,” she said, going forward from the landing. “Yes, my darling, here I am. Have you been very good?”

“Yeth, Mother,” answered the child.

“Well, then, I have brought a young lady to see you. Come and say ‘How do you do?’ to her. She is a friend of mine, her name is—what is your name, Miss Hamilton?”

“Ella,” I answered, “a name that I like much better than Miss Hamilton. Will you call me ‘Ella,’ Leo?”

“Yeth.”

“And what is your name?”

“Leopold Thtuart Milford,” he replied.

Lady Constance laughed. “I am sure you do not understand that,” she said. “Leopold Stuart Milford, but only Leo to his Mother.”

“Only Leo to Mother,” he echoed.

“And now, will you show this young lady

to a room where she may take off her hat? Shall she go into the south room?"

"Yeth."

He trotted before me till we reached the room indicated, which I found was situated in the wing surmounted by the tall turret, so visible an object from the surrounding country; and here I was left for a few minutes alone.

I descended the stairs just in time for luncheon, and came into the drawing-room to find another stranger present besides Sir Leopold. A tall man with thick moustache and fair hair, eyes in which one could read thorough good-temper and honesty, and a pleasant hearty manner, totally free from affectation. One glance sufficed to show me that he was the person whose appearance had been so descanted upon in my recent visit to the Thorburns; and at the recollection of it I blushed to the roots of my hair. It was evident that he recognised me also. What could he have thought of me if he supposed that I had taken

part in the discussion which must have been so palpable to him? The remembrance made me uneasy, and not the less so because I felt that I was making it apparent. Bowing stiffly, I sought the first chair which came to me, casting my eyes down to the floor, conscious that he must observe my stupidity. It did not appear to cause him any feelings of uneasiness, however, for he was talking with Sir Leopold about the merits of game as an article of food, and appealed to me as to my preference. As I had hardly ever tasted any, unless it was sent to us as a present by some of my father's patients, I felt that my authority was not great upon the subject, and so my first speech was blunderingly spoken, and I was too conscious of it to attempt any remedy. But the entrance of Lady Constance put me right in a very short time, for she came in just then, saying in her pretty voice :

“I hope you have been introduced to my cousin. Captain Douglas — Miss Hamilton,”

regardless of his remonstrance, "Oh, my dear Constance, we have done all that long ago."

Their playful manner made me feel less conscious, and by the time that we were half-way through luncheon I found that I was able to put together a tolerably long sentence without blushing or faltering. Sir Leopold was the quietest of the party. He really seemed ill and depressed, and I felt sad and sorry for him.

"Do you ride, Miss Hamilton," he asked, as if by way of conversation rather than interest in my pursuits; and to my answer that I was very fond of it, but had little opportunity of indulging in the exercise, he continued: "That is something like myself. I, too, am very fond of it, and used to ride a great deal, but that was before I had a heart," and here he smiled feebly.

Lady Constance laughed. "Why Leopold, you are alarming Miss Hamilton. She will think you a sort of ogre. He only means

that he used to ride before he was ill ; for now, unfortunately, he cannot do so at all."

"No, indeed," he said sadly, "nor do anything else, I am afraid."

"I am so sorry," I said warmly, my compassion aroused. I longed to say "Do let me help to amuse you," but could not dare to do so, and yet the sight of his suffering, sad face quite depressed me.

"Thank you," he said gently, while Lady Constance added, "Do you sing or play, Miss Hamilton? My husband is passionately fond of music."

"Yes," I answered, glad to be of service, "I both sing and play a little."

"Then we will call for some music after luncheon. We all love music here, don't we, Claude?"

This was addressed to Captain Douglas, who responded heartily, and to whom I ventured at last to lift my eyes without fear of growing uncomfortable.

“Perhaps you will sing for us after luncheon?” he said, echoing Lady Constance’s words, and looking at me as he spoke.

“I shall be very happy to do so,” I said stiffly.

Lady Constance twined her arm within mine as we left the dining-room, and said in a low voice: “Miss Hamilton, may I be permitted to take a great liberty?”

“In what way?” I asked, surprised. I could not fancy her doing anything but what was charming and gracious.

“May I call you by your christian name?”

“Yes, certainly.” I flushed with pleasure. And this was the lady my mother would not know for fear of her patronage. What could be a greater proof of her desire to know me intimately?

“Do,” I repeated, smiling, “I should like it so much.”

“Very well. And this may be our compact.”



She kissed me upon my cheek while I felt a thrill of delight pervade me. What could be a greater mark of friendship? I longed to throw my arms round her neck in return, to say or do something which should show her what I thought of her, but after this she only walked the length of the drawing-room, opened the grand piano which stood at the end of the room, and then seated herself upon an ottoman, taking her little dog upon her lap who had been lying upon the rug.

“I will not ask you to sing just yet,” she said, “it is too soon to do so. My cousin will be in directly, and then we can have some music.”

Then I saw that her own face was slightly flushed, and that she spoke nervously. I hoped she had not already repented of her kind action.

Captain Douglas came in shortly after with Sir Leopold, and took his seat near me. I soon found, from his conversation, that he was

a brother of the Mr. Douglas whom my old school-friend Mary Leslie had mentioned, and who lived at Wentworth; and that he, also, was stationed there with his regiment. He was not handsome, not even good-looking, but there was an easy man-of-the-world air about him which I admired. I had seen but few men in my short, unsophisticated life, and this man was quite unlike anyone else whom I had met. And yet there was a coolness about him which I did not altogether understand. I was not sure whether he wanted to be friendly or familiar; and though I liked his manner, did not feel certain whether I ought to respond to, or to resent it.

“So you live in Halton, Miss Hamilton,” he said, cutting the leaves of a periodical beside him with a pocket paper-knife. “Rum little place, ain’t it?”

Now I did not know what to answer to this question. It was true that I felt ashamed to acknowledge that I did live in Halton, and

considered it worse even than "a rum little place," but to hear another person express such an opinion upon it chafed me sorely.

"Yes," I replied stiffly, "I do live in Halton."

And Lady Constance supplemented my answer with her own. "Yes, Claude, you know Miss Hamilton lives in Halton. I should think she would resent such an opinion expressed about her birthplace."

"Not at all," I then said more amiably, "I am not very fond of Halton myself, although I do live there. I can understand that it would strike a stranger as being very unlike other places."

Then he laughed and apologised, which made the sting a little more poignant.

"You have lived there for a long time, I suppose?"

"Yes, ever since I was born; but my sister is at school, or rather, she is staying with a school-friend before she returns to us for the holidays, and my brother has not come

home yet. We are expecting them both very soon, but in the meantime we are rather dull without them."

"Your brother is at college, is he not?" asked Sir Leopold.

"Yes," I replied. "The vacation has begun, I believe, more than a fortnight ago, but he is still away; in London, I think, about some business," I added frankly.

"Yes, so I understand," said Sir Leopold, as if this information was no news to him. "He is older than you, I think, is he not?"

"Oh yes, he is twenty-one, and really seems older, he is so sensible. I am sure my father thinks more of him than he does of us all."

"An unusual circumstance," chimed in Captain Douglas. "Mine always thought more of his girls, didn't he, Con?"

"Yes," she answered playfully; "but I should think you hardly expect to be ranked with your sisters, so superior as they are to you in every way."

“Thanks,” he answered with mock gravity. “Don’t you think my sisters must be very nice, Miss Hamilton?”

“Very,” I replied laconically, not knowing what answer was expected to such a remark.

“Well, so they are. My sister Helen is awfully good; and I, being the Benjamin of the family, am naturally the one who comes in for most lectures.”

“I will not allow such a libel to be passed upon your sister Helen,” said Lady Constance, smiling. “If she does read you lectures, she utterly fails in her endeavours to make you as good as you ought to be.”

Helen—Helen Douglas—Aunt Helen! The name sounded familiar to me.

“I have heard of her, I think,” I said to Lady Constance.

“Indeed?” she said quickly, while a deep blush overspread her face; “from whom?”

“From her niece, Mary Leslie, who was a friend of mine at school,” I answered, a little

annoyed at her manner. Was there anything so surprising in this circumstance?

“Oh yes, I forgot,” she said in an altered voice. “You were at school with the Leslies, were you not?”

“With Mary?” asked Captain Douglas.

“Yes,” I answered boldly. “She was a great friend of mine. I used to stay with her sometimes in the holidays. I have heard her mention her uncle at Wentworth Court—your brother.”

“Indeed? Mary is a good little girl,” said Captain Douglas, patronisingly. “But are we going to have any music, Miss Hamilton? I think we were promised some.”

I went to the piano in answer to this appeal, and played a waltz, and then a short piece of music. Afterwards I sang a simple ballad which I could play without my notes, and which did not give me much trouble to render expressively, as I had been well taught at school.

“That is delicious,” murmured Sir Leopold, words which I felt to be true praise from the manner in which they were spoken. When I concluded I saw his mild blue eyes resting upon my face as they had looked at me in the carriage, and I was glad that I had given him so much pleasure. I was not allowed to rise for some time, for he evidently enjoyed my performance, and it was a new feeling to me to have my music appreciated. Lady Constance then sang in a rich powerful voice, such as I should have expected her to have from her manner of speaking; and then her cousin was called upon, who, after making several mock excuses, went to the piano, and rolled out a little French *bravura* song. His was a fine voice, but it was evident that he did not care about the song which he was singing, and after one or two false chords in conclusion he sprang up from the piano, declaring that he could not remember anything more. At this juncture little Leo, who had just returned from

an expedition which he had been taking with his nurse, entered the room and ran towards his father, regardless of Captain Douglas' entreaty that he would patronize his services.

"Tum and sit upon Tousin Taude's knee," he said, "and make a pony of him," at the same time indicating that there was a knee at his disposal for the purpose of equestrian exercise.

"No, thank 'oo," answered the child. "I with to thit with Father," and he clambered up to the sofa upon which Sir Leopold was sitting, and nestled close to his side.

"Are 'oo better, Father?" he asked, turning his little face towards him, as if by that means he would be more enabled to read the expression of his father's face.

"Yes, Leo—always better when I have my little son with me," was the reply. "Are you going to stay for a little while and listen to Miss Hamilton's singing?"

"Ith that Mith Hamilton?" asked the little



boy in his lisping voice, pointing at me with his small finger. "Her yeal name 's Ella, you know."

"Yes, so it is. But still she is Miss Hamilton, Mr. Hamilton's daughter — your good, kind doctor, who made you well when you had the measles."

"Yeth," said the child, as if in joyful recollection, "when I had thpoths like a thpotted leopard."

"What a delightful retrospect!" said Captain Douglas. "And what did Mr. Hamilton do with your skin? Take it off and give it to your mother for a rug?"

"No," said the child, with smiling incredulity, "he gave me thome hawwid medithine."

"But it made you well, Leo," said the father.

"Yeth, Father; why don't he make you well too?"

"Because no one can make me quite well

except my little boy when he is good and quiet."

"I will be quite quiet then," he whispered, slipping one little hand within his father's white fingers, and looking at him with big blue eyes.

There was something very touching in this little scene; the peculiar gentleness of the father seemed almost to awe the little boy into subdued quiet, and to rouse a sympathy within his childish breast which otherwise might not have existed; and the tender love which the poor father—who felt himself slipping away from those around him—lavished upon his only child, seemed to call forth tenderness in return which was as beautiful as it was unusual.

"How are you going home, Miss Hamilton?" asked Captain Douglas, somewhat abruptly, breaking the thread of my reverie over this picture of domestic love. "Is anyone coming for you?"

"I think my father is coming," I answered,

wondering whether this speech was a prelude to an offer on his part of accompanying me himself. "He promised to call for me soon after luncheon."

"I wonder if we should have time to go out first?"

"I daresay," I replied, looking at my watch—which warned me, however, that it was already four o'clock—and then at Lady Constance for permission.

So we sallied forth—my desire having been at once regarded as a decree—Sir Leopold walking feebly behind us, with his hand resting upon his wife's arm.

I wondered if Lady Constance was aware of the state of her husband's health, *i.e.* fully and entirely aware,—whether she was conscious that he was hastening towards that valley from whence none of us can return, but through which all must pass alone. Perhaps his illness had crept upon him so stealthily that she did not realise the hand of death which was upon him,

as people are so wont to forget who are in daily and hourly communion with its victims. She was tender and gentle in her manner towards him, frequently stopping that he might recover the breathlessness from which he appeared to suffer, or holding his hand as if to impart strength and courage to his weariness. After he had walked for about ten minutes he seemed almost exhausted, and was glad to sink down into one of the garden seats, she sitting beside him. I was thus left to my companion, who chiefly kept up the conversation, my thoughts running back to the little scene in domestic life which had so interested me a short time before. I liked Captain Douglas—I liked his naturalness, his frank, free manner. I wondered what sort of uncle Mary Leslie had found in him, and whether he regarded me in the same light as he did her—as “a good little girl.” I found myself at length talking to him quite freely, of my school-days and companions, of my songs and books, of my plea-

sant visits in London, and of some of the people I had met. We wandered on, down through the garden with its banks of flowers which were blazing in all their glory under the July sun, till we had reached the iron paling which bordered the lawn and opened upon the park. Here the sound of horses' feet arrested our attention, and I saw through the trees the well-known sight of my father's brougham.

"He is come," I said, ejaculating faintly though audibly what I meant to have said *sotto voce*—"and this happy visit is over."

My companion looked at me. "Have you enjoyed it very much?" he asked.

"Yes, very much. Lady Constance is so kind. But now we must hasten back; for I never like to keep my father waiting, his time is so precious."

We walked back rapidly to the house, where we found my father. They were all in the drawing-room again, and it was evident that Sir Leopold had been suffering from faintness.

Lady Constance stood beside him, calm and cheerful as usual, the bright flush of health mantling in her fair cheek as she answered my father's questions. Fearing that I might be an intruder, I left the room at once to go upstairs for the rest of my walking things. That pale face haunted me and turned me sick with pain and dread, and I was too unaccustomed to illness to offer any assistance. I knew that my father thought very seriously of Sir Leopold, that any one of these attacks might prove fatal: what if it should be so now, actually, in my presence? I had never come face to face with death—the thought of it appalled me with a truer sense of its awful mystery than I had ever felt before. My own heart beat violently, my face grew pale, as I crossed the hall and prepared to go upstairs. But as I laid my hand upon the banister, another hand touched mine, not laid over, but beside it, so that our fingers just met.

“I hope you are not alarmed, Miss Hamil-

ton?" was said in a low, deep voice. "Sir Leopold is much better now. He has been rather faint; but it is all over, I think. You are not frightened, are you?"

"No, not at all," I answered in a voice which I felt contradicted my words. "But I cannot be of any use, and so I thought it was better to keep out of the way."

"But you will come into the drawing-room again, I hope?"

"Oh, yes. I am only going upstairs to get my cloak."

I came downstairs again, to find that the patient had recovered, and that coffee was being served. Lady Constance was talking to my father as if she, too, had got over the alarm which she must have felt, and I soon discovered that it was of myself she was speaking.

"You will allow Ella to come again, I hope," she was saying. "We have been so delighted with her music. I really think it has done Leopold more good than your tonics."

“ I am glad to hear it,” said my father, looking pleased at the praise which was bestowed upon me. “ I know that Ella will be only too delighted to come whenever you will permit her to do so. Will you not, Ella ? ”

“ Yes,” I said, not disguising the pleasure which I felt.

After Lady Constance’s friendliness towards me to-day, I should have no scruples about visiting her, in spite of my mother’s prejudices. If she felt inclined to show kindness, who was I that I should reject it ?

“ Thank you so much,” I said at parting, “ I have had such a delightful day.” And then I went out to the carriage in company with Captain Douglas, my father lingering behind to say some more parting words.

I thought this interview would never end. More than a quarter of an hour passed before he made his appearance, while I felt rather guilty at keeping Captain Douglas so long under the beams of an afternoon sun in his



hatless condition. When my father came out, at length, he stepped back from the carriage window by which he had been standing, and opened the door for him. Then he shook hands with us both, with firm, strong fingers, which seemed to hold mine with an iron grasp, and then waving his hand, he moved backwards up the stone steps slowly, his eyes still fixed upon my face.

I plunged into conversation hastily.

“Father, what made you stay so long? Were you talking about Sir Leopold?”

“A little, my dear.”

“A little! I thought it was a great deal. Do you think him so very ill?”

“He is ill, certainly, very ill—but it was not that which engaged all my attention to-day.”

“No? What was it, then?” I asked with curiosity.

“Well, my dear, if you wish to know, we were speaking of you, part of the time.”

“Were you? That was very kind,” I said,

my vanity touched. "I hope you said something nice about me."

"I am not quite sure whether you would think it nice, Ella. It was kind, certainly."

"Oh dear," I said, making a little wry face, "I hope you were not descanting upon my bad qualities."

"No, not at all. We said nothing but that which was most flattering to you. But I shall not tell you now what it was. Your head has been stuffed quite full enough for one day to occupy it for several hours, so you must be content to wait till a fitting opportunity occurs before you hear any more. And try to make yourself happy in the meantime."

Happy! If all days had been as happy as this one, how bright my life would have been! As we drove back through the avenue whose old trees cast their shadows across our path—no longer bright with a noonday sun as it had been on our entrance—did any thought cross my mind of gaunt spectres which would in like

manner overshadow the brightness of my future life? Ah, no. My capacity for enjoyment was at its height. The long rays of departing sunshine came down upon us in fitful gleams through the swaying branches, which the evening breeze softly stirred into motion, and the birds sang joyously overhead. It was impossible not to feel in harmony with the peacefulness of it all, and no thought of future sorrow troubled me while the present was so sweet. If all our lives could be spent in the joyous dreams which we dream at eighteen, the world would be a pleasanter place than many of us find it.

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## CHAPTER V.

## MORE HEART-BURNINGS.

“Life is chequered shade and sunshine.”

*Longfellow.*

AFTER this visit to Milford my spirits revived. I no longer grumbled at my surroundings, though the aspect of home was in many respects as annoying to me as it had been at first. Life was too short, I thought philosophically, for useless repinings, and I had much to make me happy. I felt fairly bubbling over with laughter and excitement for the next few days, which was not the best kind of happiness, I admit, although it might have been the most natural

under the circumstances. I broke out into snatches of songs upon all occasions, to the apparent astonishment of my quiet mother, who hardly seemed to appreciate this sudden change in my behaviour, and I tried to be kinder and more helpful to her, which was, perhaps, the most favourable sign of improvement that I had yet manifested. Lady Constance became my warmest friend, and my visits to her were frequent. Sometimes my father took Mildred and me out there early in the day, and called for us again in the afternoon, but Lady Constance never came to our house, and my mother still adhered proudly to her resolution of not knowing her.

When Agnes came home from school, she, too, joined the expeditions, and became almost as fond of my friend as I was myself. Matters had gone thus far for a few weeks, when I received a little blow to my ardour from a conversation which took place between my father and me.

I had frequently longed to ask him what had been the substance of his discourse at Milford, of which I was the object, but hitherto had had few opportunities of doing so. His time seemed fully occupied, and I rarely, if ever, saw him alone. My mother, probably, could have answered the question as well as he, but there seemed a wider gulf between us now than there was in the old time, and upon any subject referring to Lady Constance I felt an awkward reserve with her. The opportunity presented itself at last in a homeward drive with my father from Milford, and I boldly plunged into it.

“Father, you have not told me yet what you were talking about at Milford that day that I lunched there. You promised to do so. Will you tell me now?”

“Well, Ella,” he said kindly, “I told you that you might not altogether like it. Lady Constance was proposing a plan for you which would alter your life a little.”

“What do you mean?” I asked quickly. The prospect of companion to herself crossed my distant vision. It was before the days of lady-helps, or that, too, might have occurred to me. But my father had hinted that I might not like it, and I could only think of something of the kind.

“What do you say to being a governess?” he asked abruptly.

“A governess!” I repeated, crestfallen; “a governess!” It was the same proposal as that which my mother had made to me. Was it possible that the subject had been discussed all these weeks before I had known Lady Constance myself? “I don’t quite understand,” I faltered. “Does she want me to become governess to Leo?”

“No, no,” said my father hastily. “It is not to herself she wishes you to go. It is to a cousin of hers, a lady who lives some miles off, and who has two or three little children who are just beginning to be educated. Well,

Ella, what do you say?" For I was sitting with my hands clasped before me, my eyes fixed upon the objects that we were passing, but not seeing or heeding one of them, while mingled pride and disappointment were clashing within me.

"I don't know what to say," I faltered. "It seems such a new, such a strange idea."

"Why should it be so?"

"Well, possibly it is not so to you," I replied bitterly; "for I suppose it has been talked of for some time. I remember now that Mother mentioned it to me several weeks ago, the very first time that I had seen Lady Constance, in fact, and I thought then that it was because I was discontented with my home, and that she meant it as a sort of punishment. But I did not dream that it was being taken into discussion all this time, talked over, and planned with Lady Constance. I thought that now I was so happy, and had found such a friend, it was to be quite different."



“Is the idea so terrible to you, then?”

“Not terrible, if by that you mean terrifying. I daresay I could get on as well in that capacity as in any other. But I should not like it.”

“We have all of us to learn that lesson, Ella,” said my father, sadly. “The very best of us must sometimes do what is most unpleasant. You will not be worse off in that respect than the rest of the world.”

“I suppose not,” I answered in what I knew must sound a very sulky tone of voice; “and I daresay I could do it if it was necessary.”

“And suppose it may be necessary?” said my father.

“Why, Father,” I asked quickly, “have you lost money? or is there a reason for my doing this?”

“There is a reason undoubtedly, or I would not ask you to do so. But I have not lost money. I sometimes wish I had a little more, but that is not the point at present. The ques-

tion simply rests with yourself. Will you accept this situation, or not?"

"You will not tell me why?" I asked, hesitating before I answered.

"Yes; I do not object to that. In the first place, I think you want a little more society than you have at present."

"But at what a cost should I obtain it? How much society shall I have as a governess? To be looked upon as an inferior, a menial, a sort of upper servant, to be treated with kindness in its most patronising and galling form,—if that is how I buy my society I would rather remain without any."

"I hope that your experience will not prove so bitter as you imagine, Ella. If I did not know where I was sending you, I too might fear this for you. But I know that these friends of Lady Constance Milford's would not be likely to treat you in such a manner."

"But Lady Constance herself? If I were a governess, would she speak to me in the manner

in which she has hitherto done? Would she call me Ella, and kiss me as she did to-day?"

I wrung my hands with misery at the thought.

"Undoubtedly."

"Ah no, I know better than that," I said hopelessly, feeling that my elated ideas had become so suddenly crushed. I had thought that she wished to know me for my own sake, that she had asked me to her house for the pleasure of my society, and, for the time being, had considered myself a sort of princess meeting with another princess upon common ground. And now it proved to be a plot, a snare to sound the depths of my character and capabilities. My dream had melted into air.

"Why, my little girl, you seem to have very vague ideas of Lady Constance's character," said my father, laughing. "I am sure if she would not speak to you because you were earning money honestly as a governess, I would not speak to her. Come, Ella, you must not be absurd. I did not wish to shock

your feelings so considerably; but we will give up the idea altogether if it annoys you. Perhaps Agnes may be induced to consider it some day."

This was poor comfort. It was evident that my father desired one of us to undertake the situation; and why should it not be I? With all my faults, I was not selfish. If it was absolutely desirable, I would consider the matter, and perhaps my conclusions would be more favourable in a few days. It was only at first that I felt so totally unprepared for a change of plans.

"Father," I said remorsefully, "do not think me ungrateful for all that you have done for me. Indeed, indeed I appreciate it. Do you want help in the form of money, or was it only for my own sake that you thought of this?"

"Well, Ella, I acknowledge that I am not too well off. I make a good many bad debts, and I have owed money for some years, which

I would gladly pay, and so ease my mind of a responsibility."

I remembered then this debt to Mr. Thorburn of which I had before heard, and was ashamed of myself directly. "Oh, Father," I said, "how unkind I have been! I never thought of that; and I am sure you have trouble often, for your face looks so sad. You, and Mother too, are the quietest, saddest people I ever saw, to have light-hearted children like us."

He smiled, ever so faint a smile, as if a memory brought mingled joy and woe back to him.

"I was once as light-hearted as you are," he said, looking straight before him, as if he saw some object in the distance through the front window of the brougham.

"Were you?" I said eagerly, "Then what has changed you? Some heavy sorrow, I am sure it was."

He did not answer, perhaps he could not. A shadow of pain crossed his face, and he

shook his head sadly. Then I knew that I must ask no more questions, and kept silence.

We were driving up the High Street now, and I was not sorry that our drive had come to a termination. My father had another visit to pay before he could return home, so it was proposed that I should drive up to our own door while he paid it. As I neared the house I saw a cab before the door, from which luggage was being removed, and a second glance sufficed to show me that it was my brother Edmund.

We had not seen him since Christmas, and even in this short time he seemed to have developed and improved. He was singularly like my father, and had his tall, erect figure, and regular features. His hair was the colour of my own, and now rippled in tiny wavelets of curl over his head. I felt very proud of him, and saw that my mother looked so too.

“Why, Edmund, my boy, we have been expecting you for a week or more,” she exclaimed

as she embraced him. "How was it that you didn't write? Surely the holidays began long ago?"

"Yes, Mother, the vacation is a month old now. But I thought you knew I was in London; didn't my father tell you?"

"No, love. He has been busy, I suppose; indeed, I know he has, and harassed and worried."

"Ella, you knew it?"

"Yes, dear, I did," I answered, flushing a little at the thought of my having been the recipient of news which had not been communicated to my mother. She turned to me instantly—

"Did your father tell you?"

"Yes, Mother," I answered guiltily.

"It is more than he has to me," she muttered; and I saw that she was wounded.

Edmund, who, like my father, was also reserved, became silent, but said, after a pause, "What is the matter with my Father?"

“Only patients, I suppose,” said my mother, shortly.

“Yes,” I put in, anxious to change the subject. “He has two or three patients very ill. One woman he has gone to see now; and Sir Leopold cannot recover, I suppose.”

“No, I am afraid not,” said Edmund in a low voice. “How sad it is for his wife!”

“Yes,” said Agnes; “and she is such a sweet woman. I wish you knew her, Edmund; she has been very kind to us lately.”

“I do,” said my brother, “a little; that is, I saw her in London a short time ago.”

“You did, Edmund?” repeated my mother, who had not quite recovered her usual manner. “Well, of all the mysterious creatures that ever lived, I think you and your father are the greatest. And pray what have you been doing in London?”

“Not very much, Mother,” said Edmund, laughing a little nervously. “I did not know that it was a mystery, or I would not have



mentioned it; but now that I have, it can't be helped. The truth is, that Sir Leopold Milford has been using his influence to get me a berth in the War Office, and I am in hopes that I shall get it."

"Dear me," said my mother, "what lucky people some folks are! All the same, I think you might have mentioned it."

"Dear Mother, are you not glad to hear of my good fortune?" asked Edmund, gently. "I know that my father must have had hard work to keep me at college for the last three years, and I am thankful to think that I shall soon be able to work and repay him a little for what he has done for me."

Edmund did not say then what he afterwards told me, that my father had allowed him three hundred and fifty pounds a-year ever since he had been at Oxford. This might partly account for our being poor, for I was sure that my own education had been expensive, and my heart smote me for my unkind-

ness in having grumbled when my father had proposed my assisting him. I knew that my mother would be pleased at Edmund's prospects when her momentary flush of annoyance was over. She was only nettled at not being received into the confidence of her husband and son, which was but natural. I, being a woman, felt a strong sympathy with her, and took the first opportunity of upbraiding Edmund for his reserve about the matter. We were walking round and round the old yard with its grass-plot in the middle, as we used to do in the days of our childhood, my arm linked within his in happy confidence.

“For you know, dear Edmund,” I concluded, after commenting upon his reserve towards my mother, “I think Mother is hurt when she thinks that our confidence is withheld, although she does not give us much encouragement. It is only natural that she should desire to know all that affects our welfare; and sometimes I

think that Father does not talk about family matters so much as he might."

"Dear Ella," said my brother gently—he was so gentle with all his manliness—"I think our father is right. He does not like the idea of our movements being known to the Thorburns; and this is one way of avoiding it."

"Do you mean that Mother repeats it?"

"I am afraid so," said Edmund. "Of course she means no harm; but things leak out somehow, and it annoys Father greatly."

"I should think so," I said indignantly, contrasting their vulgar curiosity with the high-bred delicacy of my friend. "Oh, Edmund, I wish we had never known those people; I cannot think how our acquaintance began."

"I don't know," said my brother; "I think it was a mistake in the first instance, and Father did not think any harm would come of it. He was too much occupied when we were children, and we used to be allowed to play

together. Then, when we grew older the mischief was already done, and it was too late to stop it."

"Yes; and there seems to be some reason why they are to be let down easily," I said. "I don't see much of them myself, but I know that Mrs. Thorburn slips in now sometimes by the side gate after Father has gone out in the morning. Poor thing, I daresay she is glad to come and talk to Mother about her own affairs; she has not many friends."

"But they are doing well," said Edmund; "I hear they are building a new house."

"Well, very likely she comes to discuss the pattern of a carpet, or the price of a new arm-chair."

But I could not feel quite satisfied about these confidences, although I laughingly rejected them. I hoped that my mother had not discussed the prospect of my becoming a governess with Mrs. Thorburn, who, though a kind-hearted woman, was sufficiently purse-

proud to patronise me for it. This new house that the family were building was likely to cost them a good deal of money, and I had detected a certain boastfulness in their manner of speaking of it which had irritated me greatly. But I saw that neither my father nor mother wished to offend them, and that both were much more gracious in their manner than I ever felt inclined to be. Since Agnes came home we had not been to see them, and I knew that one of the dreaded visits must be contemplated before long.

My mother had proposed that very day that we should return the family call which had been made by Mrs. Thorburn and her daughters, with all due ceremony, adding that she did not wish us to appear stiff and unfriendly with them. "And whatever you do, don't ride the high horse," she had said in her emphatic manner. "They are quick enough to see that sort of thing; and I don't want my girls to pass for stuck-up proud people, when they are

only the daughters of a poor doctor. I am not afraid of you Agnes, but Ella is terribly given that way."

"No, Mother, I am not," I had said pettishly; "only Mrs. Thorburn is so dreadfully vulgar."

I saw that my mother did not like this mode of speaking, and evidently attributed it to my new acquaintance with Lady Constance, for she flushed a little, and said irritably, "Well, everyone can't help the manner in which they were made, child. Perhaps if you had been born vulgar you would not have seen it."

Poor Mother! Now I was in a melting mood towards her, softened by the pain which had been inflicted by my father's and brother's reserve. I loved her dearly, and often wished that I could give her better proofs of my affection. Perhaps she would be pleased if we went to see the Thorburns, whatever her motive might be for desiring it.

"I will go to-morrow," I said to Edmund. "If Father and Mother wish us to be kind, we

may at least respect their wishes." And feeling very magnanimous for this resolve, I imparted it to Agnes, who entirely agreed with me.

On the following afternoon we surprised my mother by informing her that "We must go and pay that visit"; and Agnes and I set out together, my remark, "Come along, Agnes; let's go and get it over," being fortunately made out of ear-shot.

We found the two younger girls at home, Annie and her mother having gone up to look at the new house, which was about a quarter of a mile off.

"You have never seen it yet, Ella, I do believe," said Kate. "Can't you come up with us now and look at it? We won't be a minute putting on our hats."

I would have refused this offer, but I saw that for some reason Agnes was willing to yield, so I reluctantly gave way. But it was with an ill grace, for I did not care to be seen walking along the High Street in company

with Kate Thorburn. I felt this still more when they came down into the sitting-room again, ready equipped, and looking—as I afterwards told Agnes—like a pair of popinjays! However, there was no help for it, and we sallied forth together, not in so amiable a frame of mind myself as I ought to have been, in spite of the honour that had been conferred upon me.

“Now this *is* nice!” exclaimed Kate, gushingly, as soon as we were in the street, apparently unconscious of my inward annoyance. “It quite reminds one of old times, doesn’t it, Ella?”

“I don’t know,” I answered stiffly; “we are all so much older than we used to be in those days.”

“Why, of course, everybody must grow,” said Kate, laughing. “But you have got so proud since you were grown up; we never see you now.”

“Nonsense, Kate,” I said, feeling a little



embarrassed by her candour, "I have more to do now than I had when I was a child—" but I faltered, for I knew that this excuse was slightly exaggerated.

"Oh no, Ella, it isn't that," said Kate, good-temperedly, "*we* understand, and we don't really mind it much. Mamma says it's all right, that such a gentleman as your father couldn't be expected to know us intimately: but all the same, I don't think Pa quite likes it."

This was said confidentially, with a nod of her head which made all the feathers and flowers begin quivering and shaking as if they were afflicted with palsy. The candour of her remark only irritated me, and I said indignantly: "How can your father expect to know mine well, when he is so busy? You know my father is out from morning till night: he never gets home until the evening. How can he have time to know anyone?"

"Except Lady Constance Milford," said Kate, with a malicious smile. "He manages to

know her pretty well, I should think, for he is always going there."

"Of course he is," I answered defiantly. "You don't know, perhaps, that her husband, Sir Leopold, is very ill—likely to die, in fact, and my father has to be there constantly."

"And you too, I suppose," continued my tormentor. "We have seen the carriage pass by the shop and stop at your door times out of mind lately, and we have seen you in it too. My patience! didn't you look fine, driving off with Lady Constance herself, the other morning, in her own brougham?"

"Did I?" I asked angrily; "I am sorry to hear it. I didn't feel so, I think."

"Oh, come, Ella, you know you did. We watched for you all day, wondering where you had gone, for we saw you go down by the King's Arms, as if you were going to the station. Then in the evening we saw you drive by in the big carriage, and stop at your own house. Where did you go, Ella?"

This impertinence was more than I could tolerate patiently. I answered in my haughtiest manner: "As you appear to know my movements so well, it will be unnecessary to inform you. It is sufficient to say that I spent a day with Lady Constance Milford; will that satisfy you?"

"No," said the pertinacious Kate, with aggravating good temper. "I want to hear a lot more; do tell me something about it."

What reply was upon my lips it is impossible now to say, as it will ever remain unspoken. It may be sufficient to remark that I had now reached such a pitch of indignation that I was on the point of turning homeward, when a glance in the direction before me arrested my movements. A gentleman was driving down the street in a dog-cart, and was at that moment lifting his hat to me. In an instant I saw that it was Captain Douglas.

I could have cried with mortification. A second time he was to meet me in the com-

pany of these people, not in the same manner as Lady Constance might come in contact with them, but as equals and companions of my own. My face tinged with the blush which overspread it, already heightened in colour by the aggravation which I had received. Kate eyed me narrowly, evidently mistaking the cause of my embarrassment.

“Why, how you do colour!” she said. “Who was that? Somebody coming from Milford, I’ll be bound.”

“It was Captain Douglas,” I replied briefly.

“What, that swell who has been staying there lately? He has bought several things out of the shop, and said the bill was to be sent to Captain Douglas: is this the same man?”

“I suppose so,” I answered laconically.

“Why, yes, of course, you remember him,” said Kate, as if her memory had just furnished her with another brilliant idea. “You were at our house the day we first saw him, the

same gentleman who nearly ran over Helen and me.”

I felt almost regretful that the accident had not taken place, if it would have put a stop to Kate's chattering tongue for ever, but I had sufficient forbearance not to betray this Christian sentiment. I merely muttered something about “a slight recollection” of the circumstance, and then, seeing a new house in process of erection at a little distance before us, asked if that was to be the new mansion.

“Yes, that's it,” said Kate; “isn't it a fine one? It will cost a heap of money, Pa says.”

“I daresay,” I answered absently. I was thinking of the money my father owed Mr. Thorburn, and wondered if that which was earned so hardly was being spent in this handsome dwelling.

It was a stone building standing in a large piece of ground, and looked to me nearly completed. There were no steps as yet to the door, but the flooring was all laid, and some

of the mantelpieces were put in. There seemed to be several rooms, all large and lofty.

As we went up the board which led to the front door, Mrs. Thorburn's voice was heard in the hall, talking to one of the workmen.

"I hope we shall find it a comfortable apartment," we heard her say; "Mr. Thorburn is very particular about his study, and I should like to be sure that this sort of grate would answer for it."

I could have laughed outright with indignation and contempt. Mrs. Thorburn, forsooth, talking of her husband's study! He who had never known anything better than the little back parlour behind the shop for his private room. I wondered of what his library would consist beside account-books.

But seeing me, she ceased speaking to the man, and held out her hand. She was always cordial in spite of my stiffness.

"Oh, Ella! why this is quite an honour, indeed. Have you come to see the house?"

“If you will allow us, Mrs. Thorburn,” I answered graciously. “I have brought Agnes with me; she is just outside with Helen.”

“Oh, Agnes, love! is it you?” And then Mrs. Thorburn and Annie both hugged my sister, who looked as if she relished it better than I should.

Agnes was now seventeen, a contrast to both Mildred and me. She was dark, with brown eyes, and at least an inch taller than I was. She had not all my pride, but, in some things, I thought her more dignified.

“Thank you, Mrs. Thorburn—I am very well. What a nice house you seem to have, and how you will enjoy being here! May we go upstairs?”

“Yes, of course; I’ll take you.” And Mrs. Thorburn walked off with her, saying in a loud confidential tone as she went, “It’ll be an expensive affair, though, before it’s done; think of the curtains and carpets it will take!”

“When do you expect to get in?” I asked of Annie.

“About October. I daresay we shall find it very unfinished at first, but we shall soon be used to it; and it will be so nice after having been over a shop for so many years.”

Annie had no false pride about her, for which I liked her. We stayed long enough to inspect the whole house, upon which even I, in spite of my annoyance, could not help pronouncing a favourable opinion. Coming out, however, I pleaded business with my sister in another part of the town, and we walked off in an opposite direction.

I gave a sigh of despair as we left them, and then said :

“Oh, Agnes, I sometimes wish we had never been born.”

“Why, Ella?” asked my sister simply.

“Agnes, dear, you don’t know how dreadful it is, to have to be polite to these people



when one feels exactly the reverse, to endure their vulgarity, and to take it in a friendly spirit, when all the time it is burning into one's heart. I know that I am out of temper now, but it is Kate Thorburn who has made me so."

"What has she been saying?"

I told my sister, with no attempt to control my annoyance.

"I will not know them," I said passionately. "In spite of all that Father or Mother say, I will leave home; I will go out as a governess; I will do anything to help Father pay back his money, if it is that which obliges us to keep up an intimacy with them. But be friendly I never will, and that is the end of it."

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## CHAPTER VI.

## A DAY AT WENTWORTH COURT.

“I’ll take the flowers as they fall,  
I will not vex my bosom ;  
Enough, if at the end of all ;  
A little garden blossom.”

*Owen Meredith.*

At the end of a week I had made up my mind about the question which my parents had proposed to me. Should I become a governess? I sought Lady Constance’s advice, anxious partly to discover her motive in suggesting it, angry at first with her for the thought that she had done so, but forgiving when I heard her delicacy in speaking of it, her desire being,

as she said, to make me happy. I found that the lady to whom I had been recommended was no other than Mrs. Douglas, the sister-in-law of Captain Douglas, and the aunt of Mary Leslie. It stung my pride a little to hear this, despite my friend's assurance that she was a charming little creature whom I could not fail to love. The children were all darlings: little steps one above another, and numbered four, the youngest, however, being entirely under the charge of his nurse. Finally, it was suggested that we should go over there for half a day to luncheon, so that I should be better able to judge for myself what my future life would probably be. Mrs. Douglas had invited me as her guest, Lady Constance assured me. She was not the sort of person who was likely to trot me out and judge of my paces. Lady Constance had spoken of me as her friend, had told her all about me, and, in fact, had so far insinuated me into her good graces as to give her a strong desire to know me.

All this was very flattering, and helped to take off the new edge of my fear, but, all the same, I was nervous at the prospect. How should I meet Captain Douglas? Was I to be on the same terms with him as I had been at Milford, or was I to maintain a more dignified reserve, as befitted my position? Perhaps I should not often see him if I lived at Wentworth Court. I could not expect to come much in contact with the family, for I remembered that Miss Marks usually desired to be alone when she had the opportunity. Well, I did not suppose that my duties would be so arduous as hers, and, after all, "Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage," so that it was possible to be happy even in solitude. But this question about Captain Douglas troubled me more than any other. After seeing him as I had at Milford—more than once now—I felt almost intimate with him. My friendship with Lady Constance, his cousin, had made a sort of bond between

us, as well as the old school intimacy with Mary Leslie.

And now I must alter my demeanour and become the governess—the dependant in his brother's family, from whom I received wages. A little shiver passed over my frame, in spite of all my philosophy. But I was determined to go through with it now, come what might, and therefore it was with no surprise that I received the expected note fixing Thursday for our expedition.

But when the time came for me to start, a strange unquietness possessed my mind once more, and caused me to shrink from the pain of leaving home. I shed a few tears secretly, as though I were ashamed of them, then braced myself up for the coming ordeal, determined to show no one—not my mother, even—the effort which it cost me.

I dressed myself with care, as I had done on that eventful day when I had paid my first visit to Lady Constance. I put on my

muslin of pale blue, which I knew became my slight figure, and arrayed myself in the coquettish little hat, with its simple folds of muslin and lace. Then throwing over my shoulders a handsome lace scarf which had been lent me by my mother, I tied it in a loose knot behind, and descended to the dining-room, where the family were assembled at dinner.

When I presented myself before my father and mother, I saw by the tremulous glance which each bestowed upon me that some sentiment stirred their breast beyond that which was excited by the sight of their daughter going forth into the world. I shall never forget the fervent "God bless you!" with which my father returned the proffered kiss, or the tears which filled my mother's eyes, and caused a falter in her voice, as she asked me if I had everything ready. Then I sprang out of the room, fearful that I, too, should break down, and betray my weakness, and so spoil

my eyes for the company whom I was to meet. I hardly heeded poor little Mildred's hug, who ran after me into the hall, exclaiming, "Oh, I do think you are the loveliest girl in all the world!" and then I tripped out of the door towards the carriage which was waiting for me.

Lady Constance gave my hand a little squeeze as I stepped into the brougham, looking earnestly, at me out of her large, magnificent eyes.

"Are you ready?" she asked gaily; then seeing my agitation, added: "Ella, I am afraid you are not satisfied."

"Yes, yes, I am," I answered, though with quivering lips. "You are too kind, too good. Don't speak of it, please. I shall be all right in a minute."

She turned her head from me and looked out of the carriage-window, and then I saw that her own eyes were full of tears: could she be weeping for sympathy?"

"Claude is to meet us at the station," she said in a few minutes, "was it not good of

him to come over to Halton for the purpose of escorting us back to Wentworth?"

"Very," I said briefly, my heart fluttering at the news. I had not anticipated that my behaviour would be put to the test so soon, and almost dreaded the sight of him. But he came forward to the carriage smiling, and put out his strong hand, crushing up my trembling fingers while he addressed himself to his cousin :

"Come, Constance—you are just in time, the train is just starting. How's Leopold?"

So any embarrassment which I might have felt, was clearly not perceptible.

He and Lady Constance kept up most of the conversation between them, I only answering in brief monosyllables, which must have appeared very stupid to them both. But I was in no mood to talk, and had to begin practising my new *rôle* as governess, so as to become accustomed to it. Lady Constance glanced at me from time to time with reassuring looks, and as I



read in her countenance a desire to befriend me, I felt more and more foolish.

At the Wentworth station I was startled by the sound of a cheery voice proceeding from a tall, strong-limbed man not unlike Captain Douglas, who walked beside us, with one hand resting upon the window, as the train slackened its speed.

“Well, Constance, here you are at last! Glad to see you. Is this your friend? How-do-do, Miss Hamilton?” and then a hand was put out which seized mine with a firm grip.

I made no reply, and fortunately he did not appear to expect one, for he immediately began talking with his cousin as he led her towards the carriage. I was thus left to the care of his brother, who seemed to be too much occupied with the meeting of his dogs to say anything to me. I did not utter a word while we drove through the lanes, across the open common, and skirted the town of Wentworth with

its ugly barracks and lazy-looking inhabitants. But I breathed a sigh which was more like a flutter of my heart as the carriage drove through a small plantation, and then sweeping round came suddenly upon an old red house which stood almost hidden from sight among the trees.

A few minutes more, and I found myself in a spacious hall with orange-trees and hot-house flowers shedding sweet perfume from their fragrant blossoms. Tall statues bearing lamps, or crouched in graceful attitudes, stood at intervals, and a flight of stairs branching off into a double flight as it reached the first landing, led the way to the upper rooms.

I thought it was the prettiest house I had ever seen. The scent of those orange-trees comes back to me now, fraught with many recollections upon which I dare not dwell. The sun, slanting through the large stained glass window which overlooked the landing, sent its rays down upon the tessellated pavement in blue,

green, and orange. How the remembrance makes me quiver! How every pulse is stirred by the recollection of it all as it first struck upon me! I had hardly time to take it all in, before a clear, ringing voice was heard speaking to someone; then a side door opened, and a pretty little creature ran towards us, followed by two small children. Was it possible that this fragile-looking girl was the mother of these children, the mistress whose treatment I had so much dreaded? She came running towards us like a child, dressed in white, with a soft shade of pink lighting up the delicate, peach-like complexion, and shining from her smooth brown hair.

“Oh, Constance, I am so glad to see you!” she exclaimed, springing up to meet the kiss with which my graceful friend greeted her; and then she turned to me, giving me as shy a handshake as I could have bestowed upon her.

Lady Constance bent down and kissed the children, who submitted to it with rather an

ill grace, and scampered away when I approached them for the same purpose. They were soon brought round, however, by the sight of a small parcel which emerged from Uncle Claude's pocket, and came into the drawing-room mounted upon his shoulders in triumphant state.

“Claude—how naughty!” was the little mother's remonstrance. “You know I don't allow sweets, especially before dinner.”

But Uncle Claude was evidently a person who submitted to no rule except that of his superior officers'; he laughed coolly, and attempted no sort of apology for this infringement of the household law.

“Chocolate is very nice, isn't it, Mab?” he asked of the small queen who reigned upon his right shoulder; “ask Mamma to have some.”

“No, thank you, Mamma does not wish for any. Claude, I am really angry; only look at her fingers, and Edyth's mouth. There, run

away, darlings, and have your faces washed." And in obedience to this command Uncle Claude bore them off to mysterious upper regions.

"I daresay you, also, would like to wash your hands, Miss Hamilton?" said Mrs. Douglas, turning to me and speaking to me for the first time. "Shall we come upstairs, Constance?" And rising as she spoke, she led the way herself, up the handsome staircase, and down a side passage which led from the broad landing. She threw open a door, saying, with a timid blush, "Will you walk in here, Miss Hamilton?" and after hoping that I should find everything comfortable, closed the door again, and returned with my friend to another part of the house.

It was a small room into which I had been ushered, hung with blue chintz, and furnished in some light-coloured wood. A little brass bedstead stood in one corner, draped with blue, and fresh curtains of embroidered muslin hung before the window. The toilet-table was

covered with muslin and lace, and looked fresh and simple ; while a few pictures on the wall, chiefly sacred subjects, a crucifix over the mantelpiece, and a Bible covered in morocco, showed that a regard was paid to religious ideas, by externals at least. I was glad of this, for I had dreaded entering a house where I saw and heard of nothing but the world. I sat down in an arm-chair near the broad, open window, after removing my hat, and gave myself up to a survey of the room, and to a reverie of what the future would be. This, no doubt, was to be my bedroom, and Mrs. Douglas had shown tact and delicacy by allowing me to remain alone in it for a little while. Already I felt grateful to her, and for her kindness in giving me so much luxury and comfort. It was different from anything to which I had as yet been accustomed, and as I thought of the contrast between it and my own poorly furnished bedroom at home, I felt my heart almost bound with a sudden rush of hope and

comfort. After all, the world could not be so dreadful in this pretty house; Mrs. Douglas could never be formidable, and the children were too small to be troublesome. What had I to fear? And why need I fret myself with imaginary troubles? It was better than staying at home, a burden to my father, and fretted by a thousand wants which could never be satisfied.

I sat and thought on, my eyes following rapidly every minute detail of the prettily furnished room. The small writing-table in the middle, with its prettily carved ink-stand and Swiss pen-holder; the blue cloth which matched everything else, with its soft tint, restful and satisfying to the eye; the snowy bedstead; the delicate carpet with its spring flowers:—all seemed to speak of repose, and comfort, and refinement.

But the sound of a gong resounding from the hall put an end to my dream; then gay little voices were heard along the passage on

their way from the nursery, and I rose, glanced at myself once more in the toilet-glass, and prepared to leave the room. Opening the door, I came upon a little group, who were walking hand in hand, and chattering as they went.

They were indeed "little steps." The eldest, Lilian, I had not seen before, but she was evidently "Miss Douglas," as she walked between the other two with conscious superiority.

"No, Edyth, you must take my hand. Don't you know we have company to-day, and it's proper?" And the dignified little creature marched on with the two tiny trots beside her.

I waited till they had passed my door and then softly crept out, encountering on my way a respectably dressed woman, whom I rightly conjectured to be the housekeeper. She stared at me boldly as she passed, probably taking in the new governess, a mode of reception which



I did not altogether relish, and I hurriedly made my way downstairs to the drawing-room.

To my surprise, no one was present, but I heard voices proceeding from the terrace outside, and found that it was Lady Constance speaking with Mrs. Douglas. It was evidently about myself, for I heard the words, "a girl with refined tastes," spoken by Lady Constance, and then they wandered away, and turned again the length of the broad terrace. As they approached a second time, it was Mrs. Douglas who was speaking. I heard her say, "I will do my utmost to make her happy," and then they turned the handle of the side door, and entered by the hall. Mrs. Douglas approached me, saying in a timid voice :

"Luncheon is ready, Miss Hamilton ; will you come with us, please ?"

I rose and followed them, Lady Constance stepping back and putting out her hand to me with a smile. As we approached the dining-room the two gentlemen made their appearance

by the side door which led from the garden, and we all entered together. The children were already seated at the table, and Lilian, the eldest, put her head back carelessly to receive the kiss which Lady Constance bestowed upon her. She gave me a cool, supercilious glance, and then said :

“What is this lady’s name ?”

“Miss Hamilton,” answered the little mother ; “and I hope you will be very good, Lilian, and show her how well you can behave at table.”

“I always behave well, Mamma. ‘For what we are going to receive, the Lord make us truly thankful’—What are you laughing at, Uncle Claude?—‘for Christ’s sake. Amen,’” said the dignified little specimen of humanity, without changing the tone of her voice or pausing for a breath, to the amusement of everyone present. “Uncle Claude” made no attempt to conceal his mirth, but laughed outright ; and even the servants smirked stealthily.

“Lilian,” said her mother, with grave reproof, as soon as she could command her voice, “that is not the proper way to say grace. You are in too great a hurry ; you must say it over again.”

The little face flushed slightly, and she answered shortly :

“Edyth can.”

“Very well, then ; Edyth say it.” And so, with much difficulty and a good deal of prompting on the part of her sister, Edyth, who was four years old, managed to get through this tremendous effort of memory, we keeping our heads bowed for an indefinite period of time while Uncle Claude’s ill-suppressed amusement kept up a running accompaniment.

Mrs. Douglas looked at him reproachfully, though her eyes were brimming over with mirth.

“How naughty you are !” she exclaimed ; “I will not allow you to come here at all if you teach us such bad manners.”

Captain Douglas made a wry face at Lilian, and said :

“ Only hear what Mamma says, Pussy-cat, that you are teaching me to behave very badly, and she can't allow me to come here any more unless you behave better.”

“ Mamma didn't,” was the contemptuous reply ; “ she said *you* were naughty, and so you are.”

“ Very well, Miss ; I shall remember this. No ride on the pony for you this afternoon. I will have Mabel instead, who is much nicer than you. What are these, Amy ? Chutton mops ? Will you have one, Constance ? ”

“ No, Claude, thank you ; and they are not mutton chops, but lamb cutlets,” said his cousin, smiling ; “ perhaps Miss Hamilton will have one ? ”

“ If you please,” I answered nervously, almost frightened at the sound of my own voice, which I had hardly heard before that day.

He looked at me across the table as I spoke,

and I at once dropped my eyes on to my empty plate.

There was not a great deal of very solid conversation at luncheon. Sir Leopold's health was discussed, and Lady Constance told her cousins that she had left him in good hands, for her kind doctor had promised to pay him a long visit that afternoon. Mr. Douglas asked me if I had ever visited Wentworth before, and what I had thought of the country as I passed through, whether I liked children, and finally, hinted at the misty future by hoping that I should not find these troublesome.

Captain Douglas meantime devoted himself to his small nieces, who sat one on each side of him. He cut up Mabel's chicken, and was playfully scolded by his sister-in-law for giving Lilian too much jelly. He hardly spoke to me, and rarely looked at me; whereupon I wondered whether he resented my behaviour to him in the train. On the whole, I found it all a little stiff. Mrs. Douglas was shy, and I

likewise. She said very little to me, and when she did speak there was a certain awkward manner about her which made me feel still more conscious, though I was sure she meant to be kind. Altogether I was not sorry when luncheon was over, and began to wish that we were once more in the train and on our way back to Halton.

After luncheon it was proposed that we should all go down to the hay-field which adjoined the garden, and have tea with the children, and this plan seemed to give unbounded satisfaction to all present. But as we had to wait for a little while before it could be brought into action, Mrs. Douglas asked for some music, and Lady Constance prepared to oblige her. Seating herself at the piano, she sang a little trilling Italian song in her rich clear voice, and then followed it by an English ballad sung with sentiment and grace. She rose after a few minutes, and looking to me, asked if I would not allow Mrs. Douglas to hear me sing.

I looked at her almost imploringly. I felt so nervous and awkward that I was sure I should break down were I to attempt to do so, and yet I did not wish her to think me ungracious. At her request Mrs. Douglas seconded it with: "Pray do, Miss Hamilton, we should so like to hear you." And then I rose, and with trembling hands prepared to play the prelude to one of my simple songs.

Lady Constance seemed to feel for me, for she smiled sweetly as she passed, and suggested one that she hoped would do me credit. As for Captain Douglas, he was staring out at one of the farther windows, and did not appear to heed anything that was going on within the room.

The song I had chosen was "Robin Adair," and one which usually suited me, but to-day my voice seemed to have forsaken me. The words stuck in my throat, and the higher notes trembled and quavered with agitation. I got

through one verse with difficulty, and then said impulsively :

“I can’t sing, Lady Constance; I think I have a cold. Shall I play a waltz for the children?”

“Oh, please do,” said Lilian, bounding forward. “Come, Uncle Claude, you shall be my partner.”

I felt provoked at the behaviour of her partner, whose indifference was positively annoying. As he turned from the window, however, he just glanced towards me, saying :

“Will you not finish your song first, Miss Hamilton?”

“I am afraid I can’t,” I answered; “I have lost my voice to-day.”

He smiled provokingly, which irritated me; and Lady Constance, who probably appreciated the cause better than I did, whispered under cover of the brilliant waltz into which I now dashed :



“I am afraid you have lost your voice, Ella; you have hardly said a word to us to-day.”

This was what he meant, then, by smiling. If he missed my conversation, he might have endeavoured to encourage it by a few remarks of his own. I blushed again, and putting down the pedals, I played faster than ever, so that no one but a ballet-girl could have kept up with the rapid music.

“There,” said Captain Douglas, throwing himself on to an ottoman at the further end of the room, after pirouetting about with Mabel for a few minutes—“there, Uncle Claude is quite dead now, Miss Hamilton has killed him. Wasn’t she cruel, Mabel?”

“Killed you with kindness, then,” interposed the little mother, “for I think that was a most charming waltz, and I am sure you all enjoyed it.”

“I have,” said Lilian, whose cheeks were flushed with the exertion of pulling Uncle Claude round; “didn’t you, Mabel?”

“Yes; I think it was the most beautifullest waltz in all the world,” answered Mabel, warmly; “and now we will have ‘Mulberry-bush.’”

So my tune had to be changed to “Here we go round the Mulberry-bush,” over and over again, till finally the players, Mamma included, were sent to school in tears, and came home rejoicing. But it served to set some of us at our ease; and after it was over, I had found sufficient voice to sing “Bo Peep” and “Little Jack Horner,” from a book of Nursery Rhymes.

“Now, children, run and get your hats on,” said their mother; “and then, Claude, we will have one song from you, and depart.”

“What, after all this exertion?” asked Captain Douglas. “My dear Amy, you must think I have the lungs of a bull.”

“So you have,” said his sister-in-law, playfully. “Come, Claude, don’t be disagreeable. I shall find you a song, and you must sing it.”

She turned over the leaves of a large book, and placed it on the piano.

“Constance, will you accompany him?” she said; “I play so badly.”

The song she had selected was Beethoven’s “Adelaide,” which I knew well; but I shall never forget how it struck upon my senses as I heard it sung then. The delicate tenderness of each appeal, the passionate, anguished cry which burst from the lips of the bereaved lover, thrilled me as nothing ever had before. I could hardly describe my sensations; and when the voice ceased, I seemed to have been brought back to life and reality from another sphere of existence.

What a voice he had! what floods of melody poured forth from that strong chest! Surely this man had a soul, who could feel such music and give expression to it. No wonder he had taken no notice of my poor, feeble attempts at singing; no wonder he smiled at my silly remark that I had lost my voice. I did

not dare to thank him, but I looked at him with eyes of admiration, as his whole being seemed to have changed in that last five minutes. He was evidently unconscious of the impression he had made, however, as he threw himself upon the ottoman, pushed back the hair from his forehead, and said coolly :

“ Well, are we going out ? ” and then I remembered that I was looking at him, and withdrew my gaze.

We all went upstairs, and on our way Mrs. Douglas asked if we would like to see the baby, and led the way to the nursery.

The children were having brown holland pinafores put on over their pretty frocks, and Lilian was having a squabble with the nursery-maid.

“ I tell you, Sarah, I won't have that ugly thing on ; I don't care what you, or nurse, or Uncle Claude, or Mamma, or anybody says—— ”

She paused as we entered the room, though

she still sat sideways upon the rocking-chair, her legs dangling down as she rocked herself backwards and forwards defiantly.

“Lilian, Lilian, what is this I hear?” said her mother, coming forward. “I am quite shocked. What will Miss Hamilton think?”

The small maiden lifted up her blue eyes to my face, and pouted her red lips. She was a lovely little creature, but I began to fear that she would be a very troublesome child to manage.

“Come,” said Mrs. Douglas, gently, “you must have on your brown holland, or else we cannot allow you to come out with us.”

The chair rocked faster than before, and the defiant expression remained unchanged.

“Never mind, Sarah,” said the mother; “you can dress the others. I am sorry that Miss Lilian will not be able to go out to-day.”

“Not in that frightful old thing, certainly. I’ll go if I may have on my blue silk and a sash.”

“To play in the hay-field?” remonstrated her mother. “Nonsense, Lilian; of course you cannot be allowed to do such a thing.”

“My white frock, then, what I’ve got on.”

“No, certainly not.”

“You have got on a white frock, Mamma, and Miss Hamilton’s is nearly white—why mayn’t I wear one?”

“Because you are a little girl.”

“I wish I was grown up. I should like to be grown up: then I know what I would do.”

“What would you do?” I asked, kneeling down beside the chair, and endeavouring to change the subject.

“Why, first I would marry Uncle Claude, and he would give me everything I wanted, chocolate, and jelly, and sweets, and I would drive about in the carriage, and order nice things, and be a grand lady.”

“But grand ladies have to do a great many things that are disagreeable, Lilian,” I said,

trying to give my first moral precept, which I had heard shortly before from my father, under cover of the prattle which was going on with baby at the other end of the room. "It is much nicer to be a little girl, and have a dear Mamma to tell you what to do, instead of having to think for yourself."

She looked at me incredulously. "You can't remember, Miss Hamilton; it is such years and years since you were a little girl."

"Oh, yes, I can," I answered, laughing, "and I remember it was very nice. Come out with me, and I will tell you some stories about myself when I was a little girl. Come," and I held out my hand, which she took reluctantly while she slid off her chair.

"Then I shan't have on my brown holland pinafore, remember."

"But you must, you know. Your Mamma said you couldn't go out without it, and I shall have to tell the story to Mabel and Edyth if you don't put it on."

This last remark had the desired effect. She suffered me to array her in the much-despised garment, which I affected to admire greatly, and remarked how Uncle Claude would like it; then turning to the baby, who was a year and a half old and could just toddle about the room, I played with him for a few minutes while the nursery-maid finished off her little charge.

“Thank you, Miss Hamilton,” said the mother as we left the room. “You have managed my naughty little girl beautifully. It is the only way with her—to conquer her, if possible, unconsciously to herself.”

“The way with a good many people,” I thought, as I turned into the small blue room to get my hat.

Coming out upon the terrace a few minutes afterwards, I found Lilian waiting for me, and as I took her hand, she claimed the promised story.

“But Uncle Claude must hear it too,” she



added, "for he is going to walk with me."

"Is he?" I asked, changing colour; "then, Lilian, you must excuse me, I can't tell stories before your uncle."

"Oh, but you must—you promised, you know, and it's very wicked not to keep your promises. It's saying what isn't true, and when you die you will go to hell."

"Miss Hamilton, what doctrines are you inculcating already?" said an amused voice behind me, as Captain Douglas approached us from the drawing-room window.

I could not help laughing.

"On the contrary, I am being instructed in these mysteries of future punishment myself, because I won't do what Lilian wants me."

"Yes, Uncle; she promised to tell me a story about herself when she was a little girl, and now she won't, because you are coming."

I felt inclined to put my hand before the

little chatterer's mouth, but Captain Douglas looked straight before him as he answered :

“ Yes ; Miss Hamilton pretends to be very much afraid of Uncle Claude. I wonder whether she is really a very unkind person. What do you think, Lily ? ”

“ I think she is very nice,” answered the child ; “ she has such pretty soft cheeks, and such a nice mouth. She kissed me just now. Would not you like to kiss her, Uncle Claude ? ”

My sensations were too painful for description, but Uncle Claude relieved my embarrassment by saying, “ Lilian, you are a chatter-box,” and then turning his head, began to whistle loudly to a large dog, who came bounding towards him. “ There, old fellow—down, I say ! that's quite enough affection. Too much demonstration isn't good in anyone. There—you may have my stick. Now, Miss Hamilton, let's have the story.”

“ Really, Captain Douglas,” I faltered, “ I

had no story to tell, only I wanted to bribe Lilian to come out, and so I thought I would make up something to amuse her."

"Well, make it up, then. I should like to hear your powers of invention."

"No ; I couldn't, indeed, before you. If you will promise not to listen, Lilian and I will walk on by ourselves ; won't we, Lilian ?"

"For a very little tiny while," answered the child ; "but remember, if it isn't a nice story I will come back again," she added in her imperious voice.

"Miss Hamilton is sure to make it delightful in the prospect of such an alternative," said her uncle. "Never mind, Lilian ; I love Mabel much better than you, and I will go and give her a ride upon Rover."

So he left us, while I made up my story about the time when I had been a little girl, and Lilian listened with eager delight while it lasted, and until we had reached our spot in the hay-field.

There we all spent a merry afternoon, tossing the children in the hay, and covering them up; and even I forgot my shyness, and romped with as much glee as the little ones.

When we were all tired with our sport, there was the business of collecting sticks and making a fire. By the time the kettle was boiling, I was glad to sink down by the two ladies, and fan my glowing cheeks with my handkerchief.

Mrs. Douglas thanked me warmly for my kindness to the children, and hoped I was not tired.

“You must sit here and rest,” she said kindly; “I will not allow you to exert yourself any more on our behalf. Burton, will you see that Miss Hamilton has a nice cup of tea, if you please.”

Burton—the woman whom I had met in the passage just after my arrival—answered her mistress demurely, and carried out her injunctions by bringing me a cup of tea, to sugar and cream according to my own fancy.

It was astonishing how sociable we all grew over that cup of tea. Mr. Douglas threw himself on the ground beside me, and talked in a genial, pleasant manner, while the children pelted us with hay, and had to be chased and tied to one another with pocket-handkerchiefs. Even Baby Lancelot joined in the fun, and screamed with delight at his sisters' capture. As we walked back to the house I felt as if a load had been lifted off my mind since morning, and my youthful spirit rebounded with as much pleasure as it had before been desponding. So this much-dreaded day had terminated, and in so different a manner from that which I had anticipated.

When I went to say good-bye to Mrs. Douglas, I thanked her for my enjoyment; and when she alluded to the future by a delicately-expressed hope that I would become one of their home circle, I said, more warmly than I could have supposed possible a few hours before, that I should be delighted to do

so. I went upstairs to get my things, with very different feelings from those with which I had last entered my little blue room, and almost stumbled over the same servant whom I had before seen in the passage. It was odd that she should have crossed my path a second time, but I had not time to think of her now, for we were already rather late for the train. I hastily gathered my belongings together, in the shape of umbrella and waterproof with which I had provided myself in case of showers. My lace scarf I had laid upon the bed before I went into the hay-field, as I valued it too much to run the risk of its being damaged ; but now, search as I would, it was nowhere to be seen. In vain I looked under the bedstead and toilet-table, turned over the pillows, and searched the drawers. There was not a trace of it, and fearful that I was keeping Lady Constance waiting, I was obliged to go downstairs without it. I told Mrs. Douglas of my dilemma, but there was no time now for a second search,

and I very reluctantly had to go home without it, rather dreading the lecture that would be in store for me when I saw my mother. I knew she would blame me for carelessness, which I felt to be undeserving, and I could only suppose that the woman Burton, who seemed to be a sort of factotum in the house, had discovered its value, and taken possession of it.

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## CHAPTER VII.

## DEATH AND DISAPPOINTMENT.

“There are none of England’s daughters who can show a prouder presence . . . .

What was I that I should love her, save for competence to pain ?”

*Mrs. Browning.*

I WAS very much concerned about the fate of the missing scarf, and was considerably relieved when the next day it was sent to me by mysterious hands which also brought a note from Mrs. Douglas. It ran as follows :—

DEAR MISS HAMILTON,

I am happy to say that your scarf was found immediately after you left, by one of the servants, who



brought it downstairs, supposing you to have forgotten it. It was discovered upon the bed in the blue room ; and perceiving that the lace is valuable, I have sent it over to Halton by a messenger, who, I hope, will deliver it safely. I trust that you are quite well after the manner in which you fatigued yourself yesterday. Lilian sends you a kiss, and

I am, yours very truly,

AMY FRANCES DOUGLAS.

I took this note at once to my mother, carrying the unlucky scarf with me.

“So it was not lost after all, you see,” I said, smiling.

My mother had been very much put out about the business. Now she said in a relieved tone, but irritably still :

“Well, that is a good thing. How careless of you, Ella, not to see a thing which was just under your nose. I will go and lock it up in my wardrobe now, and take care how I allow you to have it again.”

It was in vain that I assured her how careful I had been with it. My mother was one of those people who, having made up their mind,

no argument convinces; and, conscious that I was getting the worst of it, I left her. My father, who was present during this discussion, looked worried and uneasy, as he often did when such scenes took place. He did not appear to have taken so much interest in the fate of the scarf as we had, and I knew that he had anxieties of his own to bear. But now I followed him into the hall, struck with the expression of his face, which was even sadder than usual. As I stood with his hat in my hand, which I had been brushing, I ventured to whisper:

“Father, are you unhappy? ‘What is it?’”

“I am anxious, Ella, very. Mrs. Richards, the grocer’s wife, is dying, I am afraid; and Sir Leopold is very ill—I almost fear that he will not live till night.”

“Father!” I gasped in horrified surprise. No wonder our miserable discussion had worried him. “Is he worse, then?” I asked hurriedly.

“Yes, much worse. He was ill when his

wife came home from Wentworth yesterday, and may not be alive now. I must go, my child, do not detain me.”

“No, I will not,” I replied; “please give my love, my dear love, to Lady Constance—how I feel for her!”

I went back to help my mother with her household duties, but my heart was not in my work. It was with the lady who had been to me my kindest benefactress, my best friend, now plunged into an abyss of grief from which no human hand could extricate her. I could not realise the future for her, the terrible loneliness of her widowhood, the blank which must be created by the loss of him who was dearest to her on earth. My spirit was restless, and I longed to know the worst; but hour after hour of that day went by, and still my father came not, and no sound was brought to us upon the stillness of the air. To add to the length of the day, it was wet. Very few passers-by disturbed the monotony of our quiet

household, and only the click of my mother's knitting-needles, as they clashed in faint but regular harmony, was heard above our subdued conversation.

At length the sound of wheels rattling over the stones in our ill-paved street was hailed as a relief to our suspense. I flew into the hall just in time to meet my father as he entered.

“What news?” I exclaimed, longing yet fearing to hear the answer. “Is he better? Tell me, Father, please—at once!”

“He is gone, Ella,” he replied in a solemn voice, and then he passed on into the dining-room.

I burst into tears as I followed him. No one was within the room, and as he sat down in his arm-chair before the table, I wound my arm round his neck, and pressed his dear head close to me.

“Do tell me about it!” I entreated. “How is dear Lady Constance? is she alone?”

“Better and calmer than I expected. She

is alone, with the exception of Sir Leopold's brother, who is there. To-morrow her father and mother will probably arrive."

"How I long to go to her!" I said, letting my tears flow unrestrainedly. "She has been such a kind friend to me—how I would do anything for her! Father, dear, may I go and see her to-morrow?"

His lips twitched nervously, an action which was with him expressive of anger or pain, as he said in an agitated voice :

"No, no, my dear, you cannot go now. You would probably be very much in the way. I will go and see her myself early to-morrow morning; for she is worn out, poor thing, and wants help and advice."

His face looked so sad that I could hardly comprehend it, though I felt sadness myself. There was a wistful tenderness about it, in spite of its agitation. Why was it that he felt Sir Leopold's death so much more than that of any other patient?

“You were very fond of him, Father?” I said, putting my assertion in the form of a question.

“Yes. He was very lovable,” he answered dreamily, as if to himself. I am sorry, too, for her who has to face the struggle of life and widowhood alone.” Then covering his face, he added earnestly, “And I *cannot* help her.”

I saw that his eyes were wet with tears, as he drew his hands from before them; and inwardly pained at the sight of his grief, I brought him a glass of wine which he drank hastily. Then I left him to himself, believing that he wished for solitude; but after a time I crept back to him.

I brought his tea with my own hands, and remained beside him while he took it. I wondered why my mother, who was usually so attentive to his wants, had not been in to do this for him. But she still remained in the drawing-room, as if the death of one patient more or less had no concern for her. When

we at length entered the room where she was sitting, my father walked over to her, and kissed her upon the forehead. She looked up gratefully, and then saw, as I had done, the haggard expression of his face.

“Is it over?” she asked gravely.

“Yes, my dear.”

“How is her ladyship?”

“Tolerably well, and calm.”

That was all he said, the same answer which he had given to me. I suppose there was nothing more to say, and my father was at all times reserved. He left the room shortly after to go into his study, whither my mother soon followed him, and we three sat alone talking softly of all that had happened lately, and of our friends' kindness to us. The clock struck ten at last, and this long, weary day had come to an end. What a contrast to the brightness of yesterday! When my father came in to prayers, his face had recovered its usual calm, though the tender pained look remained; and

when we knelt with bowed heads to join with one soul in our worship of God "who doeth all things well," more than one of us noted the falter in that dear voice as it asked for consolation for all who were afflicted and distressed.

I heard nothing more of Lady Constance for nearly a fortnight. My father paid his promised visit to her upon the following day, but brought back no tidings except that she was calm and resigned, that she sent her love to me, and thanked me for my little note of sympathy, which had cost me so much pains to indite. Since that day he did not appear to have seen her, and though I knew that he must have attended the funeral, he made no remark about it, and seemed to avoid the subject. I had enough to do within doors to keep me employed, for I had promised to go to Mrs. Douglas in the beginning of September, and the time was rapidly approaching; but I was disappointed that Lady Constance had expressed



no desire to see me. I understood that she had her own relations still with her, but that formed no excuse for her apparent coolness. I could not believe that she was ashamed of my acquaintance, for that seemed quite out of keeping with the rest of her character, but it was strange that she made no effort to renew the pleasant intercourse which was thus unexpectedly broken. I missed it painfully myself, I missed the kind little notes, the pleasing smile, the winning voice with which she always greeted me. I missed the sight of her bright, sweet face, as I walked through the town, and felt restless while I longed for a return of these delights.

But a whole fortnight elapsed before I even saw her again, and I thought it strange that my father, who appeared to know her so well, and who had felt the death of her husband with so much keenness, should seem to desert her now in this great trouble of hers. And yet I knew that he saw no more of her than

I did, or, if he did so, he was reserved even to mystery about it.

One morning, about a week after the funeral, I was sitting at the window in my own bedroom, when I heard the latch of the side gate click as if opened by a timid hand ; and looking down, I saw the skirt of Mrs. Thorburn's dress whisk past as she rapidly approached the side door on her way to my mother's parlour. Remembering Edmund's words, and supposing that she had come to obtain all the information she could about our movements, I gathered my mending together, determined that her usual gossip should be frustrated if I could manage it. I made my way downstairs, timidly creeping along as I did so, that I might come upon her unexpectedly, and so take her unawares. I crossed the hall on tiptoe, but had hardly reached the parlour door, before I upset my work-basket, scattering the contents upon the floor. The door was closed, and I had to grope about in search of the scattered

articles, which were not very visible through the uncertain light of the small window at the end of the passage. I could hear, however, that she had already begun upon the sad event which had taken place at Milford.

“Not a very large funeral, I believe,” I heard her say. “The Doctor went, I suppose?”

“Yes,” said my mother, “he went, but not to the house. He only followed in the brougham.”

“Dear me, did he?” said the questioner. “Now, do you know, we wondered if he would. Pa and I said——” Here I heard no more, for the end of the sentence was finished in an undertone.

My mother’s answer was equally inaudible, but by the answer to it I gathered that it had reference to Lady Constance.

“Dear, dear! poor thing! But law, Mrs. Hamilton, it must be very hard for you.”

“It is that, indeed,” my mother uttered,

sighing softly, while I searched for my thimble in the vain hope of bursting in upon them.

“Her father and mother’s still there, I believe,” said Mrs. Thorburn, “and they do say that the Earl’s that starched and proud that——” This was more than I could bear; I hastily turned the handle of the door and walked in upon them, to the evident discomfiture of both.

“Why, Ella, you come in like a ghost,” said my mother, her cheeks flushed with the sudden surprise.

“Do I, Mother?” I asked, laughing; “it must be a very substantial one if I startle you so. But I have dropped my thimble, and cannot find it in this dark passage. Please allow me to leave the door open for a moment while I look for it.”

I went down on my knees once more, and soon discovered the missing article enveloped in the soft wool of the door-mat, but during my search no word was spoken, and there was evidently no desire to renew the subject. I

hoped, at length, that I was not interrupting their conversation, to which Mrs. Thorburn made reply, "Oh, law, no, my dear," but she did not offer to continue it, and an awkward pause ensued. It was broken by my mother.

"We were only speaking of poor Sir Leopold's funeral," she said. "Mrs. Thorburn saw it, you know, and she says it was not a very large one."

"No," said the visitor, "I didn't say that I had seen it. I was only told that it wasn't very large, considering the family's so well known. But I heard that your Pa was there, Ella."

I did not answer ; I could not. This woman's words had filled my heart with a tumult, and it was impossible for me to discuss a subject with her upon which we could have no thought in common. Her prying curiosity angered me ; her evident knowledge of facts which I had longed to know irritated me. And what did it mean ? Why had my father

not gone to the house of a friend who had been kind to us all, on the occasion of her husband's funeral? Why had Mrs. Thorburn hinted that "it was very hard" for my mother? What was hard? My mother had had the same opportunities of knowing Lady Constance as we, but her pride would not permit her to do so, and, therefore, no one was to blame but herself for the apparent slight which was put upon her. But that such a question should be discussed with her by Mrs. Thorburn was more than I could bear patiently. What interest could she have in Lady Constance or her family, or the pride and "starchiness" of the Earl, her father? And why did my mother permit her to gossip about such affairs in her presence?

I felt thankful that I had so effectually put a stop to the conversation, for the present at least, for though my mother tried to keep it up in a feeble sort of way, it fell very flat, and I think Mrs. Thorburn had to own herself

beaten this time. There was not much more gossip after this; and after a few more commonplace remarks, the visitor rose, and signified her intention of getting home.

As soon as she had departed I breathed a sigh of relief, saying :

“ Well, I am glad that she has gone at last. How you can permit her to come in, in the manner that she does, is more than I can imagine, Mother. No one else does so—why should she? ”

“ Who do you mean by ‘ she ’ and ‘ her ’ I should like to know? ” said my mother; “ that is not a respectful way to speak of any lady, Ella. ”

I laughed scornfully.

“ Dearest Mother, please don’t call Mrs. Thorburn a lady. ”

My mother looked very angry. I saw it, and was sorry the next moment.¶

“ She is as much a lady as you ever knew, ” she cried, “ till you made all your grand ac-

quaintances ; and if your head was not so filled with all the fine notions which you have got into it lately, you would be able to treat your friends more civilly. As it is, your conduct is far more vulgar than hers, for it is rude, and that she never is."

I was hardly prepared for this sudden burst of anger, and winced under its storm ; but I would not answer my mother, which, perhaps, only irritated her more.

"Why did you come down here," she went on, "if it was not for the sake of making a fuss at every word Mrs. Thorburn would say? If you don't wish to know her, don't know her, but at least be polite to her when you see her."

"I did not know that I was rude," I answered, more meekly than I felt, "and I am very sorry if I have been so ; but I thought you did not wish us to know the Thorburns, and yet Mrs. Thorburn comes here constantly."

"Well, she comes to see me—not you," re-



torted my mother ; “ and I have a perfect right to see any visitors I choose. You can stop in your bedroom another morning if you prefer your own to Mrs. Thorburn’s company.”

But all this anger did not soften my feelings one whit, except outwardly. I did not wish to irritate my mother, but I could not look at Mrs. Thorburn’s character in a different light. She might be a worthy woman, but she was not one whom I desired to know as an acquaintance. I crept back to my room, where I remained for the rest of the morning, not intruding myself into my mother’s presence till her anger had subsided. When at length the bell sounded for our early dinner, I came down again, hoping that by this time matters had righted themselves. But our conversation was constrained, as it is apt to be when two people who love each other have had a misunderstanding, which neither can correct ; and I was glad to find my father present, for the sake of having someone to sustain the table-talk.

“Are you going out in the brougham this afternoon?” I asked, hoping by this means to escape from my mother’s presence for a still longer period.

“No,” he answered. He was going in the trap, but there was no objection to my accompanying him if I felt inclined to do so. Thus having permission, I was not long in taking advantage of it.

We had not driven far before I spied in the distance the well-known sight of Lady Constance’s carriage coming towards us, and as it approached I saw, from my elevated position beside my father, that it contained three people. An elderly lady was sitting beside Lady Constance, who, dressed in her deep mourning weeds, was almost invisible behind the thick crape veil which covered her face. Opposite to them was a gentleman who I naturally concluded must be Sir Leopold’s brother. They seemed to be engaged in conversation, and if it had not been for the slight inclination of her

head with which Lady Constance returned our bow, I might have doubted whether she had seen us at all. I felt my heart beat quickly at this unexpected meeting, and turning to my father, saw, with surprise, that his own face was flushed as if with pain. He bit his lip nervously, and then the colour receding, left his usually pale face paler than it was before. Had he, too, observed the stiffness in my friend's manner, or was it only her grief which had caused it? I could not tell. In another moment he said naturally :

“ I am glad to see that Lady Constance is going out again.”

“ So am I, Father,” I answered. “ You have not been there lately, have you ? ”

“ No, Ella. I never pay unprofessional visits, as you know, and she, fortunately, does not require my services, or she would have sent for me.”

“ How did she seem the day of the funeral ? ” I inquired, ignoring the information which had

come to my ears through my character as eavesdropper.

“I hardly know,” he answered carelessly; “I did not see her that day.”

“Didn’t you, Father?” I asked. “I thought everyone must have seen her who was there.”

“By no means,” said my father; “it would have been very painful for her to have seen people.”

“But you, Father, who have been so kind a friend to her in her husband’s lifetime; surely she saw you?”

“No, my dear; I did not inquire for her, and she had her own relations with her.”

Then I saw my father’s face flush once more, and I forebore to question him upon a subject which evidently gave him pain, though I longed to know the mysterious truth. Could the presence of her grand relations have prevented her from seeing her doctor, who had been friend and counsellor to her during her husband’s life? who had gone, upon the morning

after his death, to give "help and advice," which she so sorely needed? Surely she would have been proud to introduce him to her family as one who had been present both in sickness and in health, and ready to sacrifice himself at any moment to her interests. I could hardly credit her with ingratitude, and yet it seemed strangely like it. If it was so, no wonder that my father felt keenly sore about it.

He had several visits to pay, and as I sat at the doors of the different houses, my untouched novel open upon my knees, I worried and vexed my soul with these useless questions. Again I saw the carriage meandering slowly in a circuit through bye-streets, and coming round into the open thoroughfare. We were opposite a stationer's shop now, into which my father had gone to visit a little boy who was ill with some childish disorder, and I gathered the reins into my hands with a firmer grasp as I observed the carriage slowly making its way towards me. It stopped facing me,

as if waiting to pick up someone who had alighted, and I then perceived that there were only two occupants—the strange lady and gentleman. Lady Constance must, therefore, be within the shop, and I turned my eyes in that direction, hoping that I might be able to penetrate through the darkness sufficiently to discern her well-known form. I was right. Very soon I discovered her standing at the counter, her veil thrown back, as she made her purchase of the deeply-bordered mourning-paper which she was examining. At that moment my father came down the narrow winding stair at the back of the shop, and I looked still more earnestly to see how she would receive him. I could not see her face, for it was turned from me, but I read in the warm gesture that their friendly relations remained unchanged. She put her slender hand into his with an earnestness which convinced me that he was still ranked as a friend among her many others, and then, as he turned to the shopman, she con-

tinued her purchase as before. Then gathering up the long train of her deep mourning dress she came out, the crape veil shadowing her face as before. "Now is my time," I thought, as my heart fluttered at the sight of her approach. I hardly dared to look towards her, not knowing how I should address her, how show the sympathy yet delight which I felt. But I might have spared myself these reflections. With a stately bow, the faintest shadow of a smile, she passed from the shop towards her own carriage, her glance only resting upon me for an instant. The hot, angry tears rushed into my eyes as I bent them over the book which I held. I did not venture to lift them again till the carriage rolled away from in front of me, and then forcing them back with a strong effort, I tried to take in the sense of the dancing words. But it would not do ; thoughts would crowd themselves into my mind each time, framing themselves in a new setting, which only rendered them more

tantalising and inexplicable. What had I done? Had grief so changed her that she had become transformed from the gracious charming friend of a few weeks ago, to the proud cold woman of the world? or was she ashamed to acknowledge me before her relations, as I had felt shame to acknowledge the Thorburns? Alas! this was the only construction I could put upon her conduct, and it was very bitter to me. When my father returned I spoke no word, but as soon as I reached my own room I flung myself into a chair, weeping bitter tears, where I was discovered a little later by my sister Agnes.

“Why, Ella!” she exclaimed in alarm and surprise, “what is the matter? Has anything happened to distress you?”

I clung to her, sobbing, pouring out all my disappointment and annoyance.

“Oh, Agnes!” I cried, “why was she so kind to me if she means to treat me differently in the future?” (It was what I had dreaded in my new character as governess.)



Agnes was much more of a woman than I. She kissed me gently and tried to reassure me.

“There, come and sit on my knee,” she said coaxingly, “and we will talk about it. You are too impulsive, Ella; you jump so suddenly to conclusions. Perhaps Lady Constance was hardly thinking of you then. Remember that she is in such great trouble. Only think how dreadful it must be to lose one’s husband.”

“Yes, I know,” I answered slowly; “that might be the reason, but she did not care to see me, evidently, or she would have come forward to the carriage. She seemed so cold and stiff in comparison to what she is usually.”

“But you say that she had visitors,” said Agnes, “and probably she was in a hurry. Don’t fret about it, Ella; she will be all right with you when you see her again, I daresay.”

“I hope so,” I said earnestly, as I wiped my eyes; “but it makes me almost afraid to see her again, for I do not know now how I ought to treat her.”

I paced up and down my room after Agnes left me, wondering whether such were the world's ways, and I should yet learn to comprehend them. Alas ! I did not then know how much I should have to learn before I could comprehend the ways of Lady Constance Milford.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

## AN EVENING AT THE THORBURNS.

“Virtue itself offends when coupled with forbidding manner.”

*Shakespeare.*

A FEW days after this I sat at work with my mother in her own little parlour. She had recovered her temper long ere this, and we all sat chattering gaily round her, like a nest of young magpies, when the door opened unexpectedly and Helen Thorburn walked in.

She had brought a note from her “Mamma” she said, requesting that we would all go in for one more friendly evening before Ella left

home. It might be the last opportunity we should have in the old house, and both Father and Mother desired it. I looked at my mother for reply, and read in her countenance a desire to gratify them. We had not spoken upon the unlucky subject since that eventful day in which I had incurred her displeasure, and I had no wish to do so a second time. Distasteful as the prospect might be, I knew it was not worse for me than for Agnes, and as I should probably leave them altogether before long, one day more or less would not make much difference. I was to go to Mrs. Douglas on Monday, and this was Tuesday of the previous week, so that there was not much time before me. I had heard nothing of Lady Constance since our unexpected rencontre, and hardly expected to do so, but I was feeling a little hurt that the presence of her relatives should have thus debarred me from her society.

After pleading with my mother that Edmund should also be one of the party, Helen turned

to me, and seconded her mother's invitation with an entreaty of her own.

"You will come, Ella, won't you?" she said, her round plump cheeks dimpling into a smile as she spoke. "No one will be there, you know. You must bring your work, and Pa hopes that we shall have a song or two."

"Thank you," I muttered, with a cordiality which was far from my real feeling. I could not think what else to say, or what excuse could be found for my refusal, but I resolved to ask my father's opinion upon the subject before I gave a final answer.

"How long is it since you have been there?" was his question as I told him of the invitation, and when I answered that I had not once visited them in this way since my return from school, he said, "Then, Ella, I am afraid that you must go. We must keep on good terms with these people, and it is really very good of them to invite you at all, when you are so persistent in refusing them."

So it was settled. Edmund was to accompany my mother, Agnes, and myself to one of the old-fashioned tea-drinkings, and I had nothing to do but to comply, although I could have danced the whole way there with annoyance. I had to content myself, however, with uncharitable whisperings about the evening we were likely to spend, and felt almost inclined to be angry with Agnes for her equanimity. But Agnes always made up her mind to the inevitable, and was too much of a philosopher to grumble as I too often did. She walked down the street in her quiet, stately way, her small mouth pursed up gravely, while I alternately fretted and laughed. My mother and Edmund talked gently behind us, and I thought that I must be the only discontented member of the party, which was very likely the case. I was just in the mood to turn to ridicule everything I saw and heard, and in this amiable spirit arrived at Mrs. Thorburn's door.

We were not expected to go through the

shop upon these occasions. There was a private passage leading to the back parlour, and up the stairs to the sitting-room, which boasted of its own door and bell, and through this we were ushered by the untidy handmaiden who admitted us. As it was a fine night we had only clad ourselves lightly, and, therefore, refused her pressing invitation to "go upstairs and lay the things on Missus' bed."

"Or, maybe, you'll 'ang 'em 'ere," she said, indicating a row of pegs at the end of the passage; "this 'ere 'ook is free, for me and Miss Ellun 's been and took down some of the 'ats and things, and put 'em under the parler sofa."

Agnes glanced at me, and this, together with my foolish, excited frame of mind, upset me completely. I could hardly control my features sufficiently to present myself at the "parler" door, but my amusement was evidently taken as an index of amiability, and Mr. Thorburn came forward himself in his

loud, fussy way, and extended a hand with very black nails.

“Law bless ’ee, Mother, it is Ella herself after all! And thou ’rt growin’ a pretty wench, lass, and no mistake.”

I set my teeth tightly together. I knew that Mr. Thorburn could express himself better than this if he chose, and why he should use this form of speech when addressing himself to me I could not understand, unless he hoped to give me annoyance.

I shook hands with him graciously, however, and saluted the party generally; even George, who had been in the shop now for a long time, and was almost as “loud” in his manner as Mr. Thorburn. I marked the contrast between him and my own brother, and gave an inward sigh to think that two who were so widely apart in every particular should be thrown into contact in this manner. But Edmund was standing by the little table which stood in the window, talking to Annie Thorburn, and took



but little notice of the other young man, who now presented himself to my sister Agnes.

“What’s that you’re doing?” he asked, as, the business of the evening having begun, she took a strip of embroidery from her workbasket, and prepared herself for work upon it.

“Some trimming for Ella,” she replied in her quiet voice, without looking at him.

“Trimming, eh? Now what for, I should like to know?”

“That I can’t tell you,” answered my sister, gravely, “for I do not know myself.”

“Oh, come, that’s very fine; you don’t tell me,” said her refined companion.

“Agnes,” I asked, suddenly, by way of stopping the conversation, “have you another needle? Mine has become dull, and I have not an emery cushion with me.”

“Do you want an emery cushion?” asked Helen; “there is one just behind you in that workbox, Agnes, on the table. George, you can get it.”

“All serene!” was the reply; “don’t you move, Agnes,” as she had turned towards the table. He opened the box, took the article from it, and handed it towards her; but just as she held out her hand for it he snatched it away. He repeated this once or twice, to the amusement of his two younger sisters, who watched the game with interest. Then he said, “What will you give me for it?”

“Nothing,” said Agnes; “I don’t want it myself; it is for Ella.”

“Oh, indeed! then Ella shan’t have it.—What will you give me if I give it to you?”

“Isn’t he a torment?” said Kate.

Neither Agnes nor I spoke, and finding that we did not appreciate the joke so well as his sisters, he said:

“Oh, I see you’re not up to snuff. Here, take it.”

Agnes took it from his hand, with which he immediately covered her own, giving it a tight pressure. I saw the poor child’s face crimson

with annoyance, and the two girls giggled. As she handed it to me, I said, "Come and sit beside me, dear," and I suppose I must have looked very cross, for Kate Thorburn said uneasily :

"I hope you are not angry, Ella ; you must not mind George's teasing."

"I mind his vulgarity," I might have said, but stopped myself before the words were uttered, and took the opportunity of moving my chair to accommodate the large tea-tray which was being borne aloft by Marianne at this moment.

Fortunately that broke the thread of our ideas. George had gone to open the door in answer to repeated thumps on the part of Marianne with the said tea-tray, and probably had a regard for his mother's china if it continued. He had not time, therefore, to observe the scowl on my face.

"Please, Ma'am," said the attendant advancing into the middle of the room, and speaking in a loud voice, "Mr. 'Unters ain't sent the

muffins." She deposited the tea-tray, as she spoke, with a bang on the round table, which made every tea-cup quiver.

"Now, then, Marianne, you fool," said her master, "what are you about? Do you want to break the crockery?"

"No, Sir, and I ain't a fool," she answered glibly, as if she were accustomed to this mode of address on his part. "Please, Ma'am, what shall we do about the muffins?"

"Muffins! Oh, hang the muffins!" said her master. "Let's see, muffin rhymes with 'nuffin,' don't it, Nell?" pinching his youngest daughter's cheek. "We can go without muffins for one night."

"Oh, no, Pa, we can't," said his wife. "How stupid of that man, now! and I gave him the order myself, for the seed-cake, and the muffins, and everything. Cake come, Marianne?"

"No, Ma'am, nothin' ain't come," said the maiden.

"Where's cook?" said Mrs. Thorburn;

“can’t she go and get them? It isn’t far, you know,” she added apologetically.

“Yes, Ma’am”—the girl paused and hesitated—“please, Ma’am, Cook’s gone out.”

“Out!” shouted Mr. Thorburn; “where’s she gone, I should like to know?”

“She’s out a-walking with her young man,” answered the girl, while Agnes and I bent our heads over our work in amusement.

“Well, then, the sooner she comes in, the better,” said Mr. Thorburn defiantly, “her and her young man too. I’ll allow no such goings on as this without my leave. Where’s your young man?”

The girl blushed.

“I ain’t got one, Sir,” she said demurely.

“Oh, I say, what a cram!” said George, with a wink; “who was that fellow behind the kitchen door just now?”

Marianne’s rosy face became almost like a peony.

“I don’t know what you mean, Sir,” she answered; “there ain’t no one behind the kitchen door.”

“George, be quiet,” said the more gentle mother. “Let me see: you might as well go to Hunter’s yourself for the muffins; it is but a step.”

“Not I,” was the gracious reply; “if you want anyone to do your servants’ work, you can get someone besides me.”

Edmund rose at once.

“Mrs. Thorburn, pray allow me to go—indeed, I should like to do so.”

He looked so beautiful, so graceful, as he bent forward towards her, that my heart thrilled with admiration for him; but she would not hear of it.

“No, indeed, Mr. Edmund, you shan’t,” she said firmly. “I couldn’t think of allowing such a thing. But, Marianne, you must go: I see no help for it.”

“Very well, Ma’am,” said Marianne; “but

please, Ma'am, can I speak to you in the passage?"

Mrs. Thorburn rose and went out, holding the door in her hand while they spoke in a loud, audible whisper, from which I gathered that though Marianne hadn't a young man, and it was only Mr. George's joke about the kitchen door, there was a "young person" downstairs at that moment who would just run down the street and fetch the unlucky muffins. Having thus settled it, Mrs. Thorburn returned with a mysterious face, but had hardly crossed the room before a bell was heard to ring from below.

"Here they be, Ma'am," was the announcement from the peony face as it presented itself within the door for a moment.

After some minutes' delay, in which, fortunately for us, Cook had returned, the muffins made their appearance, and we all did ample justice to the excellent tea which was provided,

although we knew that there was a supper to follow.

After tea I sang a few of my old songs, which Mr. Thorburn, who really seemed fond of music, appeared to admire greatly.

“Why, you’d do for the stage,” he said, “if you was to practise a bit. Why don’t you have some lessons?”

I knew very well why, but I could not say so to him.

“There is no one to teach me,” I answered.

“Oh, pooh, pooh,” he said pompously, “you don’t tell me—plenty of people, plenty of ’em. Now I tell you what, Ella; if you feel disposed to get a few lessons, and improve that fine voice of yours, I don’t mind standing treat for you—there now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Thorburn,” I said, trying to feel grateful—but I clenched my hands together tight with the thought that we were already under obligation to this man—“I don’t think I care about it; but I am very much



obliged to you all the same." Then I moved away from the piano, fearful that he would follow up the subject. But he did not, which was a relief, though he followed me into my corner of the room where I had once more seated myself with my work, and began talking about the new house, and saying how soon he hoped to be in it. "It'll take a deal of furniture, though," he added, "and I mean to have everything in first-rate style."

I wondered if Marianne and the Cook were to be the two servants who would assist in keeping up the style of this mansion, but of course I did not speak. In fact, I was always a little afraid of Mr. Thorburn, and anxious to keep on good terms with him.

"It is a very pretty house," I said.

"It is, and well built too: I saw to all the details of it myself. Yes, I have been in good houses in my day, and I know how the thing ought to be done; and if I had more time for it, Miss Ella," he said, speaking confidentially, "I

should look after those servants a bit, and teach 'em how to do their duty. Why, bless 'ee, they neither of 'em know how to work, not as work ought to be done. I caught Marianne polishing one of the knives on our best table-cloth, the other day, but I wigged her for it pretty tidily. I don't think she will do it again."

"I suppose you will have other servants when you go to your new house, Mr. Thorburn, will you not?" I asked; "these would hardly be sufficient for you."

"Oh, bless you, yes! My wife wants to have a footman, and all the lot of 'em; but I think she'll find that rather too much to see after. But, you see, I've been prudent, Miss Ella," he continued in a hoarse whisper; "I've not lived over this shop all these years for nothing. Why, I've been saving money, my girl, and now I mean to enjoy it."

This was a pleasing revelation to me, who hoped that now he was so rich he was not in

need of the money which my father owed him. He poked his face into my own as he made the confidential announcement, and I had vague fears that he had been drinking, and shrank a little from him. I do not know whether he observed it, but he said warmly a minute afterwards, "And you'll come and see us, Miss Ella, then, won't you—a bit more than you do now? We're old friends, you see. I've known your father and mother for many a long year. Why, I knew their fathers and mothers afore 'em; so I ought to be considered an old friend if ever there was one, oughtn't I, now?"

What could I say in answer to such a question? I could not contradict it, for no facts had ever been brought to my knowledge of the relative position that this man occupied towards us. I had never heard of my own relations on either side of the family, and knew nothing of their existence. He seemed to be in the possession of facts which were a mys-

tery to me, and I longed to inquire farther particulars; but my pride would not allow me to seek my information from such a quarter. So I held my peace, while inwardly burned the fire of longing desire to know the truth.

“You are very kind, Mr. Thorburn,” I stammered at length, “and I am sure you have always been a friend to my father. I think he fully appreciates it.” Then I paused, with the uncomfortable sensation that I was saying as much as it was prudent for me to say.

“Do you, indeed?” said Mr. Thorburn earnestly, his florid face within two inches of my own. “Well, now, do you know, I sometimes think he don’t. He’s uncommon high and mighty, is your father—always was, from a boy—and I’ve known him, boy and man, as I just before remarked.”

“Have you?” I asked suddenly, hoping that my question would elicit something beyond the bare fact. “Did you know him when he was a boy, Mr. Thorburn?”

“I should think so—rather,” he said in an important voice, and eyeing me as he spoke. “Him and me was great friends once, better than we are now, by a long chalk. Has he never said so?”

“No,” I answered, blushing rather nervously, “I don’t think he has. But I can understand your not seeing much of him now. He never visits people unless in the way of his profession, and I am glad to find that you do not often want him in that way.”

This little speech appeared to me quite a triumph of eloquence and tact, and I took credit to myself for having turned it so neatly.

“You don’t think, then, that he means to lord it over me some of these days, do you, Ella?” said the man, earnestly.

I felt almost frightened by his tone and manner as I looked at his round face and twinkling blue eyes held so closely to my own.

“Mr. Thorburn, what can you mean?” I said, in a startled tone. “My father never

lords it over anyone ; he is always gentle and good : at least, I have never known him otherwise."

" Yes, yes, of course ; and he is quite the gentleman," he said in a soothing tone ; " but I have been a good friend, Ella, and helped him through a deal of trouble when he hadn't many friends nor sixpences either. I hope he don't forget it."

" You may be sure he does not," I answered, startled by his vehemence ; " no one ever had a better, a more generous, noble mind. Oh ! Mr. Thorburn, I do love my father so ; please never say anything against him." My voice faltered, as I felt a sudden, nameless, vague fear.

" I, lass ?" he said, as if touched by my appeal ; " I've nought to say against him. Only you be more friendly, Miss Ella, with my girls, and don't hold your head so high. You're seeing too much high society, I'm thinking, and it isn't good for you."

This was going a little too far. He might upbraid me for my coolness towards his family, but he should not interfere with the society in which I chose to move. I drew my head up very stiffly and said :

“I suppose my father is the best judge of what my society ought to be, Mr. Thorburn.”

“There you go—a chip of the old block, if there ever was one. I don’t mind your knowing high families, my girl, so long as you don’t forget your old friends.”

“Oh, I shall not do that,” I answered, turning to Annie Thorburn, who now came up with a request for another song. I rose with alacrity, glad to put an end to a conversation which was growing a little beyond my control, and went to the piano, while she stood beside me turning over the leaves of my music. I took occasion, before seating myself, to glance towards Agnes, who was sitting in a corner by the fire, and then I saw that George Thorburn had taken his station by her again,

and was carrying on the same sort of ill-bred banter which had before disturbed her. Mr. Thorburn joined the group as I left him; and when the song was over, Annie went downstairs to make arrangements for supper. Then a round game of cards was suggested, which lasted some time, and which created so much amusement, in spite of our incongruous feelings, that I found myself laughing heartily. I was just beginning to think that, upon the whole, this evening had not been such a terrible ordeal as I had anticipated, when the rosy-faced maiden presented herself once more at the door with the announcement, delivered in a loud voice, and all in the same tone :

“ Supper is hup ! ”

The last word was extremely emphatic and seemed to take a prodigious effort to make all three letters distinctly audible, but it evidently did not strike anyone but me, and was a welcome sound to Mr. Thorburn, at least, who exclaimed :



“That’s joyful information. Come, girls, put up your traps. What’s the old rhyme? ‘Nineteen, twenty, my’——ahem! What’s the rest, Mother?”

“Come, Pa! Pa! mind your manners,” said his wife; which reproof was, however, lost upon me, for I did not know to what she alluded.

“Now, then! come along,” he said fussily; “here, Mrs. Hamilton, take my arm. Mind the narrow staircase, though. We’ll give you a better when you come to the new place. George, are you taking care of Miss Ella?”

“Well, I can’t take both, Father,” replied the son; “and Miss Ella won’t have me; she prefers Annie. Here, Annie, you two go first: age before honesty, you know; that’s the style,” and he galloped poor Agnes down the stairs to the tune of a popular air, while I thought every moment we should be thrown down headlong. Fortunately, however, no such catastrophe occurred, and we reached the foot

of the stairs in safety ; but I saw Agnes' proud indignant face, and knew that he had taken this opportunity of giving her hand another pressure like that which had annoyed her so much before.

“ Now, girls, fire away,” said the host, after plentifully distributing chicken and beefsteak pie, and calling Marianne “ a fool ” again for having given him the wrong carving knife and fork. “ I hope everyone isn't as hungry as I am, or else we shall make the dishes look a little foolish. Edmund, you 'll have beer ? ”

“ Thanks,” said my brother, briefly. “ Ella, what are you having ? ”

“ Why, nothing, I do declare ! ” exclaimed George. “ Perhaps she lives upon love, like me.” Here he nudged Agnes, who sat next him.

“ No, thank you, Edmund ; I do not wish for anything but water,” I answered, glad of the occupation of eating to prevent my being obliged to talk. Mr. and Mrs. Thorburn, my

mother, and Annie kept up most of the conversation, Edmund and George had evidently nothing in common, Agnes and I were silent, and the younger girls giggled.

“And what are you going to do, Ned?” asked George, when supper was half over, turning to Edmund.

“Are you speaking to me?” asked my brother, coldly.

“Of course,” answered George, with his mouth full; “who else do you suppose I’m speaking to? I was asking what you intended to do with yourself.”

“In what way?” said Edmund.

“Why, to make a little tin, to be sure. I suppose you intend to do something, like the rest of us. Going to be a sawbones, perhaps?”

“A what?” said Helen.

“A sawbones, Simpleton; don’t you know what that is? A fellow that cuts you up and puts you in pickle.”

“Ugh!” said Kate, shuddering; “how

horrid! Isn't it nasty of him to talk so at supper, Ella?"

"Very," I said coldly.

"No," answered Edmund; "I am not going to be a surgeon, I think, George. I may probably leave Halton altogether, but my movements are undecided at present."

"And a deuced lucky fellow you are if you do it," answered George. "I only wish I had the opportunity of cutting this old concern, and I'd do it fast enough."

"What's that you're saying, George?" asked the father, turning towards him.

"Only that I don't care for Halton, Father, and wish I could get away from it."

"Come, now, none of that," answered his father; "you know what side your bread is buttered on, so don't be a fool. It will be the worst day's work you ever did to turn your back on old Halton; so stick to your work, my boy, like a brick, and you won't regret it."

George did not answer, for a wonder, for I

quite expected this to be the beginning of a discussion. I took the opportunity of admiring some roses which were arranged in a soup-plate in the middle of the table, in company with a sprig or two of larkspur and some asparagus seed, and sent Mr. Thorburn off into a preamble about his roses, which "he 'oped to see in better condition when they got to the new place."

I was greatly relieved when my mother at length rose from the table, and "thought it must be growing late." We made our way into the passage to get our shawls, and there George offered to accompany us to our own door. It was in vain we thanked him, and pleaded the short distance which it was for us to go; he only made this serve as a further excuse, and at length we had to yield.

"But where in all the world's my hat?" he exclaimed, after fumbling about in all directions. "Marianne, what, in the name of goodness, has become of my hat?"

“ I think it ’s upstairs,” answered the maid ;  
“ I ’ll fetch it for you in a minute.”

“ Well, I like that,” he exclaimed, as she disappeared up the stairs. “ What do you suppose she ’s got it upstairs for ? ”

We had some recollection of the information which had been given us on our arrival concerning the “ ’ats and things,” and I had hard work to restrain my laughter, more especially as he declared himself impatient of waiting any longer, and insisted upon putting on his mother’s old bonnet, which had hung there for many years. He had just arrayed himself in it, and had announced his intention of walking home through the High Street adorned in this manner, when Marianne returned, running down the stairs with a hat in her hand.

“ Is this yours, Sir ? ”

His appearance in his mother’s garden bonnet which had been familiar to us from childhood, and with a cigar between his teeth, completely upset our gravity, and we laughed heartily.

“Where did you get it from?” he asked, without removing the cigar from his mouth or the bonnet from his head.

“Underneath the parler sofa, Sir,” she answered; “me and Miss Ellun put it there.”

“Then you and Miss Ellun may go to Bath for your impudence. Who told you to interfere with my hat?”

“Missus said as we was to,” said Marianne, sulkily; “there wasn’t no other place, and we ain’t hurt it, I’m sure. Come, just you put it on and see.”

He took off the bonnet, and tried on the other, which immediately tilted over on to his forehead.

“Why, bless my soul!” he exclaimed; “whose hat is this, in the name of wonder?”

“I don’t know, if it ain’t yours,” said Marianne.

“Well, it ain’t mine, then; it’s Father’s, you noodle!” he said angrily. “Go and fetch something to put on, for gracious’ sake, and

don't keep us here all night. Anything 'ull do: one of Ma's nightcaps, if you can't find anything else handy," he shouted after her.

"Oh, George, don't you take so much trouble," said my mother; "we shan't be two minutes getting home; we needn't take you."

"Oh, the trouble's a pleasure," he answered gallantly, "if I could find this concern, and I may as well find it now as never. Why, here it is!" he suddenly exclaimed, stooping down to a black coal-scuttle full of coals, which stood at a corner of the passage, ready for use the next morning, upon which the hat was gently reposing. "That's mine, safe enough. Now let's give Marianne the slip while she's upstairs hunting for it."

We were only too glad to get away at any price. Agnes tucked her arm into mine, and clung to me tightly, while Edmund took my mother. George Thorburn came to the other side of my sister, but gave up the attempt when he saw that she was determined not to



take his arm. He only contented himself with another squeeze of her poor little hand as she reached our door, and then I saw the tears spring to her eyes, though she ran upstairs at once to conceal them. I followed her to the room which we now all three shared in common, and throwing my arms round her, exclaimed :

“ Well, here we are at home at last, and I will never, never spend an evening at the Thorburns again as long as I live.”

I kept my word. I never did spend another evening with the Thorburns.

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## CHAPTER IX.

## I MAKE A PAINFUL DISCOVERY.

“What if with her sunny hair,  
And smile as sunny as sweet,  
She meant to weave me a snare.”

*Tennyson.*

My spirit was becoming ruffled. Only five more days could elapse before I should leave Halton to begin my new work, and yet no sign had been brought to me that Lady Constance wished to see me before my departure. I had not seen her since the day that our unexpected meeting had caused me such a shock of surprised disappointment, and it did not seem

likely that I should do so. But the day after we had spent the eventful evening at the Thorburns, I was walking down the street with Mildred when we saw the large carriage from Milford in the distance, evidently on its way to the station. I could discern the figures of two people within it, and soon saw that they were those of the elderly lady whom I had before met, and an old gentleman who was seated beside her. Lady Constance was not there: evidently her sorrow had caused her reluctance to appear in public. The old lady had no veil over her face this time, and as the carriage drove past us, curiosity impelled me to look at her. A quiet, subdued face it was, with very white hair rolled back from the forehead. The old gentleman looked older than she did by at least ten or fifteen years, and had a cold, proud expression, in spite of his handsome features. The lines in his face were somewhat hard, and there was a sternness about the mouth which contrasted un-

favourably with the gentleness of his wife's face. I thought of his being "that starched and proud," and felt that such a character was not unlikely.

"That's Lady Constance's father and mother," said Mildred, excitedly, "the Earl and Countess of Brantford. I wish we could have seen their faces a little better, don't you, Ella?"

"Not particularly," I answered shortly. "It would have done you very little good if you had, for I am sure they never thought of you."

"Very likely not," said Mildred, wickedly, "they were so much taken up with looking at you. Is that what you mean, Ella?"

"No, naughty Milly, not at all."

"But I should like to have seen more of them," said Mildred, with all the persistency of a child. "We have to go down by the station to see Jemie Browning. Let us go that way now, and then we can see them before the train comes in, if we walk fast."

“And stand and stare at them with our mouths open,” I said, laughing. “No, thank you, Mildred, I would rather not.”

“But you have to go that way,” persisted Mildred, “and we may as well pay our visit now as later. Come, Ella, do.”

As I seldom thwarted my little sister, I allowed her to lead me whither she would, not as reluctant to follow, be it said, as my words would seem to imply. A second time we had the opportunity of glancing at the two strangers, for the carriage was standing before the station as we approached it, the train not having come in. Then we walked onwards to Mrs. Browning's cottage.

But as we came up the High Street again an unexpected sight met my eyes. The carriage was before our own door, and the servant was clambering up to his place beside the coachman. He must have left some note or message, and my breath quickened at the thought as we walked rapidly homeward. I met Agnes

in the hall, and immediately inquired the result. A note, she answered, which her father had taken in ; she thought he was in the study.

I was too impatient to wait till farther information could be forthcoming, and went at once to his private room which had at one time been the old school-room. Without knocking, I peeped in, and saw him sitting before the table, his arms leaning upon the elbows of his chair, and his hands clasped together. He did not look up at my entrance, and creeping round the table I came to the back of his chair, and softly kissed the top of his head. A note lay before him, which I at once saw was in Lady Constance's handwriting."

"Oh, Ella," he said, rousing himself as if from a dream, and seizing the note hurriedly, "is that you? I did not know that you had come in."

"I have only done so this moment, Father," I answered, jerking my head back proudly. I

was annoyed with his action concerning the note. There was no occasion to conceal it, as I supposed, and I hoped that my father knew me too well to give me credit for reading anything which was not intended for me. "Is that a note from Lady Constance?" I asked, boldly stepping round in front of him so that he should see me.

"Yes," he said calmly, but not offering to show me its contents; "it is an invitation to us both to go out there on Saturday, and take Mildred also. She has had friends with her, and could not ask us before."

"Indeed!" I said haughtily. My father was a mystery: how could he, with all his pride, consent to know anyone on such terms?

He seemed surprised.

"Would you not like it, my dear?" he asked, looking at me.

"Yes, Father, I should, very much," I answered, "but not quite in such a manner. It is very evident that Lady Constance only

invites us to her house when she has no better acquaintance. Why should we go there now if we are not good enough to know her relations?"

A deep flush overspread his face, such as I had seen upon the day in which we met her, but he recovered himself instantly.

"My Ella, you do not know what you are saying," he said tenderly. "Lady Constance is the best friend that you have ever known. Do not repel her by coldness and ingratitude."

"I do not wish to be ungrateful," I said in a tumult of feeling, "I want to love her dearly. But how can I do so when she is kind to me one day, and slights me the next?"

"When has she slighted you?"

"The other day, twice, when we met her."

"Perhaps she did not see you," said my father.

"Oh, yes, she did. She could not have avoided doing so."



“I am sorry that my little girl’s feelings were hurt,” said my father, perceiving the falter in my voice which accompanied my remarks. “Lady Constance would not willingly wound anyone. But she had her mother with her, and might not have liked to detain her. Besides, Ella, you must remember that you have known her but a very short time, and she could not ask anyone to her house immediately after her husband’s death. You may be sure that she will treat you kindly when you next see her, so do not worry yourself over troubles of your own creation.”

“You don’t think she was ashamed of knowing me, then?” I asked, a little more hopefully.

He paused, and answered evasively :

“She would not be likely to invite you to her house if she was ashamed of your acquaintance.”

“But no one need know it, when she is alone,” I persisted, only half satisfied. “She

might treat me in the same manner again, if any of her relations were present."

"You may have an opportunity of judging on Saturday," said my father, "for Sir Leopold's brother is still there, Mr. Milford. I do not think, however, that you will find much to complain of in Lady Constance's behaviour."

Thus reassured, I permitted my father to indite the note, "with many thanks" accepting her kind invitation; and the deed once accomplished, I counted every hour of every day which should bring me nearer to the happy moment. It came at last, in a shorter time than I could have anticipated, and it was with indescribable sensations that I felt myself driving through the Park again to the house where I had been so happy. How sadly changed all must be within! How the aspect of that bright, glowing landscape seemed to have altered since last I was here! Then the sun was shining; now he was hiding himself

behind leaden clouds, and casting a sombre hue over the beds of scarlet geranium and bright calceolaria which decked the spacious lawn.

Lady Constance gave us as warm a welcome as I could desire, though her lips trembled as she kissed me. She looked paler than when I had seen her last, which was probably accounted for by the dismal crape which enveloped her graceful figure, and she was very silent, quite unlike the bright, light-hearted woman whom we had known before. Well, it was natural after all she had gone through.

I went upstairs with Mildred, leaving her in my father's company while we took off our things and visited Leo in his nursery. The dear little boy looked very lovely with his golden curls falling over the black tunic which he wore in memory of his father. I felt the tears spring to my eyes, as I recalled that day, the first in which I had made his acquaintance, when the tenderness between father and child had been so striking, and wondered how long

it would survive in that childish breast. But I could not question him. It was as well, perhaps, that he should not realise the pain of parting, which comes to us in later years in all its intensity, and which God, in His mercy, spares such little ones.

I came downstairs again, alone, to find the drawing-room door shut, and naturally concluding that Lady Constance wished to speak with my father alone, I lingered about in the hall till their *tête-à-tête* should be ended, now looking at the pictures, admiring the stag's antlers, or the aquarium which had been lately replenished with fresh specimens. By degrees I wandered out to the front door, and so on to the terrace, which, like that at Wentworth, ran round two sides of the house. Here I paced up and down in front of the drawing-room windows, waiting to be summoned before I should intrude upon them. The figures of both were quite visible, standing on the hearth-rug, before the bright glow of a cheerful fire,

which even upon that August day was acceptable. They appeared to be talking earnestly, probably about the illness or death of my father's patient, for I observed that his face looked scarcely less sorrowful than her own, and had hard, rigid lines about the mouth, which it distressed me to see. I paced to and fro upon the terrace, watching the movements of a gardener, who had been mowing the lawn, and was now raking together the hay and forming it into little hay-cocks in a listless, lazy manner, as if he did not relish the occupation. I wondered if he looked upon me as a very idle person also as I wandered up and down upon that sunless day without hat or parasol to screen me. I was beginning to be weary of my stroll at last, to wonder when this important *tête-à-tête* should be ended, and that I might be admitted, when, turning for the twentieth time, and glancing towards them as I did so, I saw a sight which arrested my attention.

I saw my father bend towards her as she stood beside him. I saw him kiss her, not once only, but repeatedly, passing his arm round her as he did so. I saw her lay her cheek against his own, as he pressed her to him with a face sad and despairing, and I stood there, rooted to the spot, seeing all as if in a dream.

I watched them for a moment—one brief, guilty moment—nay, it was all the work of a moment. Then I fled, running down the stone steps at the end of the terrace, across the lawn, and into the avenue, where I hoped that the trees would hide my agitation, my grief, my despair.

This, then, was why my father's visits had been so frequent at Milford House; this accounted for his keeping away when Lady Constance's relations had been present, and coming again when they were gone. There could be no reason for mystery in a doctor calling at a house professionally, or even as a

friend, during such a time as had just passed; but there was every reason for concealment if my conjectures were correct. And how could it be otherwise? A flood of thought rushed over me, bringing clearer and clearer proofs of it all. Why had he never mentioned Lady Constance's name till within a few months ago? Why did she not call upon us in an open manner, and make friends with my mother, who hardly knew her by sight? And what—oh, worse than all!—what had Mrs. Thorburn meant when she had said to my mother that it was “very hard for her”? I recalled my father's anxious, pained face, his concealment of her note, his evident abstraction when I had entered the room; and all—all pointed, with the same ghastly finger-point, to the same fact. He loved her! and he knew that his love was—must be—hopeless.

I covered my face with my hands as I thought of it, pressing my fingers tight upon my temples to check, if possible, the beating

and throbbing which seemed to stifle me. I had had my wish—I had known the Lady Constance ; but at what a price ! Could I consent to know her now in the same way ? Could I receive her caresses, her patronage ? No, a thousand times no ! Then I thought of her recommendation of me as a governess, perhaps for love of my father, perhaps to get me out of the way. Look at it whichever way I would, it was all bitterness and intense misery. In that brief five minutes my life had changed.

A footstep upon the soft grass behind me roused me slightly from my painful reflections. I did not turn my head, but presently some one entered the avenue and came towards me.

He was a young man of about three or four and twenty, and had evidently been walking rapidly, and looked rather worn and fatigued. He paused as he approached, apparently surprised to see a young lady in such a place by herself at that time of day.



“I beg your pardon,” he said politely, as he doffed his hat; “are you ill?”

I suppose I looked so, for he continued in a sweet voice, the music of which struck upon my sensitive ear:

“I am afraid you must be, indeed, you look so very pale. May I get you anything?”

“No, thank you,” I answered, trying to speak naturally, though my voice seemed to choke me; “I am not ill. I was only wandering about by myself till luncheon was ready. I am Mr. Hamilton’s daughter; and we have come to luncheon.”

How bluntly I had introduced myself; but I was suffering too much mentally to feel provoked with my *gaucherie*.

“Indeed,” he said gently. “I have heard of you, then, for I am John Milford. I am staying here.”

Poor Sir Leopold’s brother; I saw the likeness then, though he seemed so many years younger. He paused for a moment, standing

before me, though I still sat with my eyes cast downwards.

“I have just walked over from Wentworth,” he said, “from my cousin’s house. You know them, I think, Miss Hamilton?”

“Yes,” said I, in a tone of pride which aped humility. “I am going to be a governess to them in a few weeks.”

“Really? I think you will find them a very pleasant family to live with.”

“I have no doubt of it,” I answered coldly, feeling myself very rude and disagreeable.

“Will you not come up to the house?” asked my companion. “I am afraid I must be going in, for luncheon is almost ready. Pray let me take you also; I am sure you would be better for a glass of wine.”

He would have offered me his arm, but I declined; no one of the name of Milford should touch me. I was plain Ella Hamilton now, the governess-elect in his family.

“Thank you,” I said proudly, “I am better

now. I daresay it is time to go in; perhaps Lady Constance is expecting me."

I sneered as I spoke. I felt my lip curve downwards, though a little pang of remorse followed it, for I could not hate her all at once. I rose from my seat, and walked up towards the house, not looking at Mr. Milford or at anything else, but keeping my eyes straight before me, till we reached the drawing-room. There we found Mildred and Leo, who were playing with a box of toys on the floor, while my father and Lady Constance occupied two easy chairs opposite one another.

They looked rather surprised at my entrance in company with Mr. Milford. Lady Constance said:

"Where have you been, Ella? I thought you were upstairs."

"No," I answered calmly, "I have been walking in the avenue."

"Alone?" said my father. "What an extraordinary proceeding!"

“ I found Miss Hamilton there,” said Mr. Milford, “ sitting upon one of the seats under the trees. I thought she was not looking well, and asked her to come into the house and have some wine.”

“ What is the matter, my dear ? ” asked my father, wheeling his chair round slightly, and looking at me professionally.

“ Nothing in the world,” I answered, trying to speak naturally, while the colour rushed over my face.

“ That ’s well,” he said in a relieved tone. “ Thank you, Mr. Milford, for your consideration, but my daughter is not usually very delicate.”

“ I am glad to hear it,” said the young man ; “ I thought she looked rather pale. Constance, how long may I have to get ready for luncheon ? ”

“ Only ten minutes,” she answered, glancing at the time-piece ; and he left the room.

I rose from the corner where I had seated

myself, and went towards the two children, who were setting up bricks and knocking them down again for Leo's amusement. I was determined that I would interrupt no conversation which my father and Lady Constance wished to indulge in, and played with the little boy till luncheon was announced. They did not seem to have observed anything in my subdued manner, and talked together naturally, Lady Constance looking very sad in the pauses of conversation, for which I almost despised her.

After luncheon, my father went off to visit the patient whom he had to see, and we went into the drawing-room again, where Lady Constance asked me to sing. I wondered if she remembered that day, not many weeks before, when I had sung to her husband in that room, and I felt my eyes grow dim as I pictured the scene before me. I carefully avoided every song which I had sung then; but I could gather nothing by her face of what her inner feelings might be as she sat with

her hands folded in her lap, her head slightly bent downwards. I looked at her once or twice, and could not help acknowledging to myself how sweet her face was, what a lie to her true character in its innocence and purity. I glanced from her to my little Mildred, who was curled up in a corner of the large sofa, her head bent also over a book of photographs, which she was studying. I thought, perhaps my Millie might grow up like her. I could fancy that Lady Constance might have resembled her as a child, for their hair was much the same colour, and there was the same fascinating grace in each. But I put away the thought. I would rather that Mildred should die in her childish innocence than that she should grow up to bring misery and pain to all around her, as Lady Constance was doing.

After finding that I had sung the same verse over twice, I discovered how far away my thoughts must have been, and rose from the piano abruptly.

Lady Constance lifted her eyes.

“That is very pretty,” she said in a dreamy voice.

“What a hypocrite she must be,” I thought, “for I am sure she has not heard a note.”

“Pray don’t stop,” she continued. “John, you would like something else, would you not?”

“Very much,” he said, quietly, “if you are not too tired, Miss Hamilton.”

He had been standing at the table, and I hoped had been thus prevented from watching my criticism upon his sister-in-law.

“I am not tired, thank you,” I answered in the same tone; “if you would really care to have another song, Mr. Milford, I will sing with pleasure.”

Lady Constance did not second his request this time. She seemed still thoughtful, such a contrast to the bright, happy woman she had appeared to be when last I had spent the afternoon there. Perhaps she was thinking of

her husband, and felt shame and remorse for the way in which she was already dishonouring his name; perhaps she was thinking of my father and the hopeless misery which lay before them both. She was still silent when the song had ceased, and I took my place near her. When she spoke it was with an effort, and as if she were doing so because it was expected of her; but her voice was just as sweet and sympathetic, though not, perhaps, as clear and ringing as it had hitherto been. She leaned back in her chair watching Mildred, who was now standing by the table, turning over a child's album of Leo's. I followed the look, and wondered if Lady Constance was struck with my little sister's graceful attitude, and beautiful, clearly-cut face. There was a great resemblance to my father in it, and the thought stung me that perhaps it was this which had attracted her, and when Lady Constance afterwards invited the child to bring her book across to her, I felt sure of it.



“Are you fond of pictures, Mildred?” she asked kindly.

Mildred answered that she was extremely fond of pictures.

“Can you draw at all?”

Mildred replied that she could draw a little, but that she had not had many lessons.

“Which will be an excuse for Lady Constance to pay for some,” I thought bitterly.

“Oh, Millie, Millie, what a goose you are!”

“You would like to learn, perhaps?” said Lady Constance. There! it was coming, as I knew it would.

Of course Mildred “would like to learn extremely”; what else could Lady Constance expect in reply?

I looked up suddenly. “I don’t think Mildred has the least taste for drawing,” I said stiffly.

Mildred blushed and looked awkward, but Lady Constance answered graciously:

“We never know what we may do till we try, do we, Mildred?”

I groaned in the depth of my heart. How could I prevent this being done? How could I suffer an obligation from this woman, who was stealing away my father's heart. I looked up once more, hoping, in my dread of the result, that I might stop the fatal resolution, and then I saw Mr. Milford's blue eyes looking at me very much as the gentle eyes of his brother had looked upon that last memorable day which I had spent in this house. He must have thought I was a strange character, if, indeed, he had thought about me at all, for I felt that I was showing the worst side of my natural self to him. His look arrested the next speech which was upon my lips, and which, probably, would have contained more bitterness than any which I had previously spoken. But with all my spirit I was a shy girl, and I could not be actually rude to Lady Constance in her own drawing-room. I had time to think of this in the pause which followed; and it was, perhaps, as well for me that I could do so.

“Are you not fond of pictures yourself, Miss Hamilton?” asked the low gentle voice which struck me as being strangely like his brother’s.

“I know very little about them,” I answered indifferently, anxious that the tone might fall upon Lady Constance’s ear, and prevent any further display of generosity.

“I suppose one’s taste has to be somewhat cultivated by coming in contact with them, but surely you know what you like, and can appreciate such as these.” He pointed to a Madonna di San Sisto as he spoke.

“Oh, yes; everyone must acknowledge the beauty in that face,” I replied, “because it has the beauty of perfect innocence.”

“Yes,” said Lady Constance; “it is that which makes one love it so. It is the perfection of womanhood in its most beautiful form.”

I set my teeth together. I was glad that the conversation had changed, but I would not criticise the face of that Madonna with such a

woman as I now thought Lady Constance to be. And yet, as I looked at her, my heart smote me. The face was not unlike her own, so calm, so still, so truthful! how could she wear such a mask, and be such a cruel living lie?

I felt the thrill of admiration go through me which I had felt for her before, but this time it left a strange, sickly feeling behind it, like fruit which had turned to bitterness. I longed for my father to come back that I might get out of the house, out of the presence of it all; but he did not return, and I had to content myself with talking to Mr. Milford, and playing with Leo for another hour. Lady Constance did not seem to care for conversation. She looked weary, and, I had no doubt, had begun to wish she had not invited us. This thought made me more bitter still. Of course it was only on my father's account that she had ever done so, and now that I knew her motive I could understand better how to act towards her.

“Oh, if I might only go home,” I thought

in my misery, "I would try to be content. I would never wish for society again."

My father came at last. I heard the carriage drive up, and saw Lady Constance's face brighten as it approached the door. I rose at once.

"I think, Mildred, we must put on our hats; Father does not like to be kept waiting."

"Oh, Ella, you will stay and have some tea?" asked Lady Constance in a brighter tone than she had spoken since his departure. "It will refresh your father after his drive."

"You are very kind," I answered stiffly; "I think we must be going," and I went upstairs with Mildred.

When we came down again, my father was once more alone with Lady Constance; and as they stopped abruptly in their conversation when we entered the room, I at once concluded that it was about something which they did not wish us to hear. Surely there could be nothing professional to say now that Sir

Leopold was dead and buried. The child seemed very well, and Lady Constance had had ample time to consult him about her own health before luncheon.

“Well, my dears,” said my father, cheerily; “you seem to be rather in a hurry. Lady Constance tells me that you will not stay for tea.”

“We thought you would wish to be going, Father,” I answered; “you know you are always so busy.”

“Oh, I think I have time for that, if your clock is right, Co——ahem! Lady Constance.”

I looked at him suddenly; so did she, and a slight tinge of colour overspread her face; but he was looking at his watch and comparing it with the timepiece.

“Yes,” said Lady Constance, “it is quite right. I am glad that you can stay a little longer.”

I recollected then that I had never heard her call my father anything, and wondered how they addressed each other in private. Ah me! how heart-sick and miserable I was!

So another half-hour passed, he and she absorbing most of the conversation, and we only answering in monosyllables when we were addressed. I was glad when it came to an end at last, and my father rose to go. I was determined this time that their parting should be in the presence of us all; but there need not have been any difficulty about it, for Mr. Milford entered the room just before we left, and stood there while we said our farewells.

“Good-bye, Ella,” said Lady Constance, bending forward to kiss me. I slightly drew back, then offered my cheek to her, and saw that the action had displeased my father.

“Why, Ella, child, do you not know how to offer a kiss with civility?” he said rather roughly.

I could not answer him. My eyes filled with tears, which, perhaps, Lady Constance misunderstood. She evidently was not hurt, however, and kissed Mildred also.

“Good-bye,” she said. “It is very kind of

you to come and see me. I am afraid you have had a dull visit."

I could not say, "Not at all," I only walked towards the door in company with Mr. Milford, fearful that I should break down utterly.

But I had time to watch her shake hands with my father, and saw the quivering lip, the tearful eyes, which accompanied that warm pressure. And then in my heart I hated her, perhaps all the more because my passion and admiration had received such a death-blow. I scarcely acknowledged Mr. Milford's bow as he stood on the stone steps, scarcely heeded that he had sauntered away down the gravel-path as the carriage moved off, lighting a cigar as he went. My attention was absorbed by other thoughts; and as I glanced once more towards the drawing-room which we had left, was it only my own imagination which pictured the sight of a fair woman seated in the shadow of a window-curtain, with face buried in her handkerchief, apparently in the deepest distress?

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## CHAPTER X.

## PRIDE AND RESENTMENT.

“For a raven ever croaks at my side,  
‘Keep watch and ward, keep watch and ward,  
Or thou wilt prove their tool.’”

*Tennyson.*

DURING our drive homewards very little was said. My father leaned back wearily, and seemed to be in profound thought, as was usual to him. Mildred amused herself with gazing out of the carriage window, and I was revolving over the events of the day, wondering where it would all end, and upbraiding myself with a thousand reproaches. For I

felt now how wrong I had been to despise the home where, at any rate, peace and comfort had hitherto reigned. Who could tell how long it might continue when once this dread secret became known? I could not bear the misery of such an exposure in Halton, where my father was so highly respected; yet how could I mention the subject to him, and tell him what I had seen? I could not even speak of it to Edmund; still less would I allow Agnes or Mildred to be aware of the painful disclosure. I thought of my mother—she who would not visit Lady Constance, yet “would be glad that I should do so,” who would not even inquire about the particulars of Sir Leopold’s death, or show any interest in speaking of the family. How natural all this seemed if she had any idea of what was going on. And then came a remembrance of the Thorburns—those good, worthy people, whose civilities I had rejected, whose society I could not tolerate. Was it

possible that Mrs. Thorburn was in possession of this secret? Could my mother have spoken of her annoyance at the intimacy which caused her to say, "Law, Mrs. Hamilton, it must be very hard for you"? I shivered at such a thought.

My reveries were disturbed at last by the stopping of the carriage at our own door. My father assisted me to alight, saying, as he did so :

"Ella, I should like to speak with you in my room when you have taken off your bonnet."

My heart beat as if it would choke me. What could my father have to say, and how should I answer him?

I did not reply, but ran upstairs at once to my room. No one was there, for Agnes was out, and Mildred had flown to the kitchen, where my mother was, to give her all the news. I threw my hat on to the bed, my hands trembling with agitation; but I felt

that this interview must be got over somehow, and the sooner the better. I glanced at my face in the glass, and almost despised myself for its paleness; but in a few minutes, during which I had prayed that God would direct my steps aright, I felt braver, and though my limbs actually trembled as I descended the stairs, I was outwardly calm. My father was in his room looking over some notes which had been brought in during our absence, and I walked in and stood close by him before he looked up and spoke.

“Ella, my dear,” he said kindly, “I was anxious to speak to you about something, which, I am sure, will be interesting to you. I wish to mention it to you first, although I have not spoken of it to your mother yet. Sit down, my child, for a minute or two, will you?”

I seated myself. What could be coming?

“I rather hope that the proposition which I

am going to make will give you some gratification, if not pleasure," he said. "I know how glad you are to gain refinement and luxury, how difficult you find it to obtain both for yourself and for your sisters. What do you say to a proposal which Lady Constance has made to me to-day about Mildred—a proposal that she should take to her altogether, educate her, clothe her, and allow her to live with her as if she were her own child?"

He paused, waiting for my answer, while my hands twitched, my breath came fast. I looked down, I could not speak; a thousand thoughts crossed each other in my own mind, bringing perplexity and confusion. Yesterday my heart would have leapt at such an offer; to-day I was humiliated by it.

"Well, Father," I asked at length, feeling that something was expected of me, "what are you going to do about it?"

"I wished to know what you thought of it first," he answered, smiling, though anxiously.

“Would you not like to see your sister in so comfortable a position?”

“I don’t know,” I faltered; “I cannot make up my mind to part with Millie.”

“That is absurd, Ella,” he said more gravely. “You surely would not stand in your sister’s light for the sake of any selfish whim of your own. Besides, as you are going away so shortly, it cannot make much difference to you.”

I still hesitated.

“Father, are you obliged to do this?” I asked at length.

“Not obliged exactly,” he answered; “but you know what the alternative is. I cannot send her to school at ten years old with the prospect of remaining for seven or eight years, and the only other condition in store for her is to be brought up in Halton without companionship better than this little town affords.”

I, too, had thought of all this; but oh, what could I say?

“It is very kind of Lady Constance,” I murmured, considering myself very hypocritical for saying that which I could not feel.

“It is, indeed,” answered my father, and then no word was spoken between us for a minute.

“Well,” said my father at length, “I am disappointed that you take it in this manner, Ella. I had quite hoped that you would have felt pleasure at the proposal, if not gratitude.”

And, as it was, I could feel neither.

“It is so sudden,” I answered evasively; “I have not had time to think,” and then, feeling myself a great coward, I added, “and I do so hate to be under an obligation to anyone.”

“To Lady Constance, for instance?” asked my father, smiling. “It strikes me, my little girl, that you are under a good many obligations to her already. You do not know, perhaps, that it was she who paid for your education?”

This was the time to speak.

“Did she?” I asked in a voice of subdued passion. “Then I regret it more than any words can express.”

“I am sorry for that,” said my father, “because it appears like ingratitude, a feeling which I should be sorry to see any child of mine possess.”

“But why need we place ourselves in this degrading position?” I inquired; “surely it cannot be necessary for you to accept such favours in order to maintain your family.”

He paused again for an instant.

“Not necessary; but otherwise, Ella, you might have been brought up very differently from the way in which you have been.”

“How so, Father?”

“In all probability you would never have gone to school, never seen any better society than this little world which surrounds us contains, never had your naturally refined tastes cultivated. Is not all this worth being grate-



ful for, and would you deny to your sister the advantages you have received for yourself?"

"It is a hard price to pay for it," I said sullenly.

"Ella," said my father, in a colder manner than usual, "I own that I am disappointed in you to-day; you seem to have changed your nature, and become hard, cold, and unfeeling. Your manner to Lady Constance, when we left her house this afternoon, pained me. Why should you reject her kindness to you in this way, when she has shown so much kindness to you?"

"She has only shown me kindness when it has suited her purpose to do so," I replied bitterly, feeling strongly the under-current which prompted my words.

"Suited her purpose?" echoed my father, wrathfully. "What do you mean? how can it suit her purpose to be kind to you at any time?"

I felt bound to answer, though I dared not express myself openly.

“I suppose she has some motive,” I said, casting down my eyes, while my hands became very cold; “she must have a motive, or she would not do it.”

“Then let me tell you, child,” said my father, “that her motive is love, true Christian love and charity; and be grateful to God that He has sent such as her into the world to be your friend and benefactor.”

“I do not want her charity,” I said bitterly. “Father, dear, forgive me, but I cannot accept it. Do as you like with Mildred, only do not ask me to pronounce an opinion upon it, and spare me from any more of her acts of kindness and charity, for I cannot, I will not suffer them.”

My father leaned back in his arm-chair and covered his face with his hands.

“Ella,” he said, “this is beyond ingratitude, it is cruelty.”

“To you Father, or to her?”

“To us both.” (Ah! why did he couple her

name with his ? ) “To us both,” he repeated :  
“you little know what you are doing.”

“Yes, Father, I do,” I answered, trying to speak calmly, though my heart was in a tumult. “I do know what I am doing; I know that I am rejecting the ‘charity’ of a fascinating, charming woman, but, nevertheless, one upon whom I have no claim, and whose favours, therefore, grate upon me.”

He looked at me steadily.

“How do you know that you have no claim upon her?” but his voice trembled as he said it.

“What claim can I have?” I asked; “I have barely known her by name till a few months ago. Why should she not call at this house as a friend if she wishes to show friendship, and why cannot her actions be open, and not secret? We are not beggars, to be dependent upon her charity in this way.”

“And how is it that you have only made these discoveries to-day?” he asked. “How

is it that you permitted her to show you acts of kindness for which you professed yourself grateful up till the time when she needed sympathy and kindness herself, and then that you turned upon her, and in your ingratitude treated her with coldness in return for her tender consideration ? ”

“ But was it really kindness which prompted it all ? ” I asked. “ Why, then, should she barely acknowledge you or me when she met us, because she happened to have her relations with her ? Why should she profess an affection for me, which she never felt ? ”

“ How do you know she has never felt it ? ”

“ Her actions have proved it, ” I said bitterly. “ How much did she care to have me with her to-day ? She would not have asked me to go to the house, but for your sake. ” In my impetuosity I had blurted out more than I intended, and the next moment was frightened at my boldness.

“That is very likely,” said my father, calmly, “or rather, it is possible. But supposing it be so, did she not show you all the kindness which you could expect?”

“More,” I answered, “more than I expected or desired.”

“Ella, is it possible that you are my child?” The words were uttered in a voice of such pain that they wrung my heart, but I could not give in.

“Father, I may be unkind,” I answered, “but I cannot, I do not want to love Lady Constance.”

He sat up in his chair and looked at me.

“What has come to you to-day, my little girl?” he said, more gently than before; “you seem to have changed your character completely. A few days ago I thought you were in love with your charming friend; now you seem as if you were trying to hate her.”

“So I am,” I said coldly.

“But why?” he persisted; “because, poor

darling, she needs your love more now than she ever did before ? ”

He was speaking dreamily now, as if to himself and not to me, which only enraged me. My face reddened ; how did he dare to speak of her so ? Did he want me, too, to become as infatuated as he himself was ?

“ Bah ! ” I said angrily, “ I don’t believe in her sorrow. She will soon get over it. ”

“ Ella, ” he said again, in a voice of pain, “ I can only suppose that you are labouring under some delusion with regard to Lady Constance, but your words about her cut me to the heart. I cannot bear to hear them, or to think that any child of mine could show the want of feeling which you have shown me to-day. You may leave me now, I wish for no further conversation with you. Henceforward I shall take care that you are under no obligation to Lady Constance, so you may make your mind easy. ”

“ And what about Mildred ? ” I asked, rising from my seat.

“I shall do as I think proper with regard to her,” he answered coldly, “but I will not ask your opinion again.”

I went towards the door, opened and closed it behind me, without once looking back. I feared that I might give way if I did so, and I wished now to steel my heart. How could he have the boldness to speak of her in such a manner in my presence? In all the years which I could remember, I had never heard him address my mother by the loving epithet which he now applied to her; and this woman, who had been known to him but for a few years at the most, was to receive his caresses, to be spoken of tenderly even before his daughter. I ran upstairs to my room, but I would not cry; red eyes would only cause grounds for suspicion, and I must keep my counsel. I walked up and down for some time, but my reflections brought no relief, and I determined to rejoin the family as if nothing had happened.

I did not see my father till tea-time, and he did not once address himself to me. I maintained a strict composure myself, and the conversation was sustained rather feebly by my brother and sisters, my mother looking as if something had occurred to irritate her. After tea, my father called Edmund into his room, evidently for a private interview, and then the two went out together. We women took out our needlework, but though our fingers plied their task diligently, we were all very silent. A shade of annoyance was upon my mother's face, and at last she broke out irritably :

“Well, there seem to be a good many secrets going on in this house which I should like to know the meaning of. Ella, haven't you a word to tell us about your visit to-day, or is that too great a mystery to be spoken about ?”

“Ah ! dear mother,” I thought ; “ may it be long before you discover the mystery for yourself.” But I started a little at her words, they seemed so terribly real and true.



“ Oh, yes,” I said, as indifferently as I could, “ I have nothing to conceal about my visit. We spent rather a dull day, and I hardly spoke to Lady Constance, or she to me. I talked most of the time to Mr. Milford, or played with Leo and Mildred.”

“ Dear me,” said Agnes, laughing, “ what a doleful tone! Rather a contrast to your last day there, then ? ”

“ Yes, to be sure ; what else could it be ? ” said my mother. “ You don’t expect to see a woman who isn’t a widow of a month old, making a noise like a girl in her teens ? ”

Fancy Lady Constance ever “ making a noise ” !

“ How did you like Mr. Milford ? ” asked Agnes.

“ I hardly know ; I haven’t thought much about him,” I replied. “ He is a little like Sir Leopold ; only, of course, much younger.”

“ How old ? ” asked Agnes.

“ About twenty-four I should think, but I

am not clever at guessing people's ages ; and besides, as I said before, I never thought about him."

"Then he did about you, Ella, I am sure," said Mildred. "How he looked at you when you were talking about that picture !"

"What nonsense !" I said pettishly. I remembered too well the tone which had called forth that glance, which appeared to me more like one of surprise or reproof than anything like admiration. "You are too little to know anything about such things."

Neither my mother nor Agnes spoke, and their silence annoyed me.

"I don't think he liked me very much," I said, "and I thought I was rather rude to him ; but I don't care much for very young men," I added in a tone of indifference.

"Dear me," said my mother ; "how the guilt has come off the gingerbread ! Last time everything was delightful ; now we have changed our tune."

“Not at all,” I answered ; “only one cannot gush for ever.”

“Oh, no ; we don’t expect it,” said my mother ; “only you are a strange girl, Ella, for quarrelling with your bread and butter.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Mother,” I answered.

“Well, there—never mind, my dear. Mildred, it is time for you to go to bed.”

“All right, dear Mammy ; let me put in two more stitches, and then my kettle-holder will be done. Oh, dear ! how it rains ! I hope it will be fine to-morrow to go to church.”

“I hope so, too,” said my mother, as she prepared to accompany her upstairs.

So Agnes and I were left alone. Unlike my mother, she asked no questions, for which I was thankful. I was more outspoken than she was, and might have let out something for which I could never forgive myself, so I turned the tables, and asked her after the adventures of the day which had just passed.

“What did you do this afternoon, after dinner?” I inquired.

“First we went to see poor Jemmie,” said Agnes, “and then Mother remembered that she had left her knitting at the Thorburns, and asked me to go in for it.”

“Did you find them at home?” I inquired.

“Only the three girls,” said Agnes. “Mrs. Thorburn was out. But only fancy, Ella, George Thorburn saw me from the shop going upstairs, and very soon he made his appearance with an apron on, saying he thought he should catch me before I went.”

“Ugh!” I said, shuddering; “what did you say to him?”

“Not very much,” said Agnes, “you may be sure. He pretended to hunt for the knitting, and I believe he had hidden it, so as to keep me there; but when I said I must go, he insisted upon walking home with me.”

“You did not allow him, I hope?” I said anxiously.

“No, I did not,” said Agnes, “but I had hard work to prevent his doing so. He said that I planted a thorn in his bosom by my refusal, but I managed to get away from him at last.”

“What an odious creature he is!” I said with the deepest contempt. “Agnes, I do hope his attentions to you may not become embarrassing.”

“They shall not, if I can prevent it,” answered my sister. “I shall be going to school soon, and he will not see me before Christmas; perhaps by that time he may have forgotten me.”

“Let us trust so,” I said; “but George Thorburn is like his father, and does not easily give up anything that he has set his heart upon.”

“Then I hope he has not set his heart upon me,” said Agnes, laughing, “for he certainly won’t have me.”

“Don’t talk of it,” I said; “the very idea is

repulsive," and then we were both silent for a time. I contrasted the picture of the iron-monger's home with that which I had visited to-day, the refinement and elegance of the latter as compared to the common vulgarity of the former. What a cruel position was mine! If I could but find a middle course where I could meet with congenial tastes, without the sacrifices which I was forced to make! Ah! bitter, vain hopes which would never be satisfied.

Agnes broke the silence first, by saying:

"I daresay, Ella, you feel these things even more than I, for you are fortunate enough to be noticed a good deal by Lady Constance Milford, and I can fancy that after paying her a visit it must be very distasteful to you to hear an account of George Thorburn's vulgarity."

"No," I answered, "I don't think that; I should have disliked it at any time. Besides, I don't fancy that I shall become very intimate with Lady Constance."

“Don't you really? Well, you have begun pretty well, Ella.”

“Yes,” I said indifferently; “but I don't wish to be known on those terms. I will never be patronised by anyone.”

“Does she patronise you?” asked Agnes.

“Well, it looks like it, I think,” I answered proudly. “She never comes here, as you know; why should I go to her?”

“Because, Ella, ‘we have to put our pride in our pockets,’ as Mother says,” replied Agnes, “if we want to get on.”

“Well, then, don't let us get on,” I said pettishly; “and please don't use such expressions yourself, if Mother sees fit to do so.”

Agnes did not answer me. She was too reserved and dignified to quarrel, and probably felt the rebuke as much for my mother as she did for herself. She understood my variable moods, and no doubt ascribed my present irritability to some annoyance which it was as well for her not to inquire into. Though we were

so different, we were the closest friends, and loved each other dearly. Our father and mother had taught us to live in peace, and had set us an example by their own lives ; for though they must have differed in opinion often, they never held any argument in our presence.

Alas ! in my restless, irritated state, I could only long for a continuance of peace, not daring to anticipate what the future would bring, when all must become known. I was glad now that I was going away, and should at any rate be spared the pain of coming in contact with these miseries. Perhaps by the time I returned matters would have become better ; and I could only pray, and trust, that God, the great Ruler of our lives, would hear my petitions, and avert the evil which I so much dreaded.

END OF VOL. I.









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